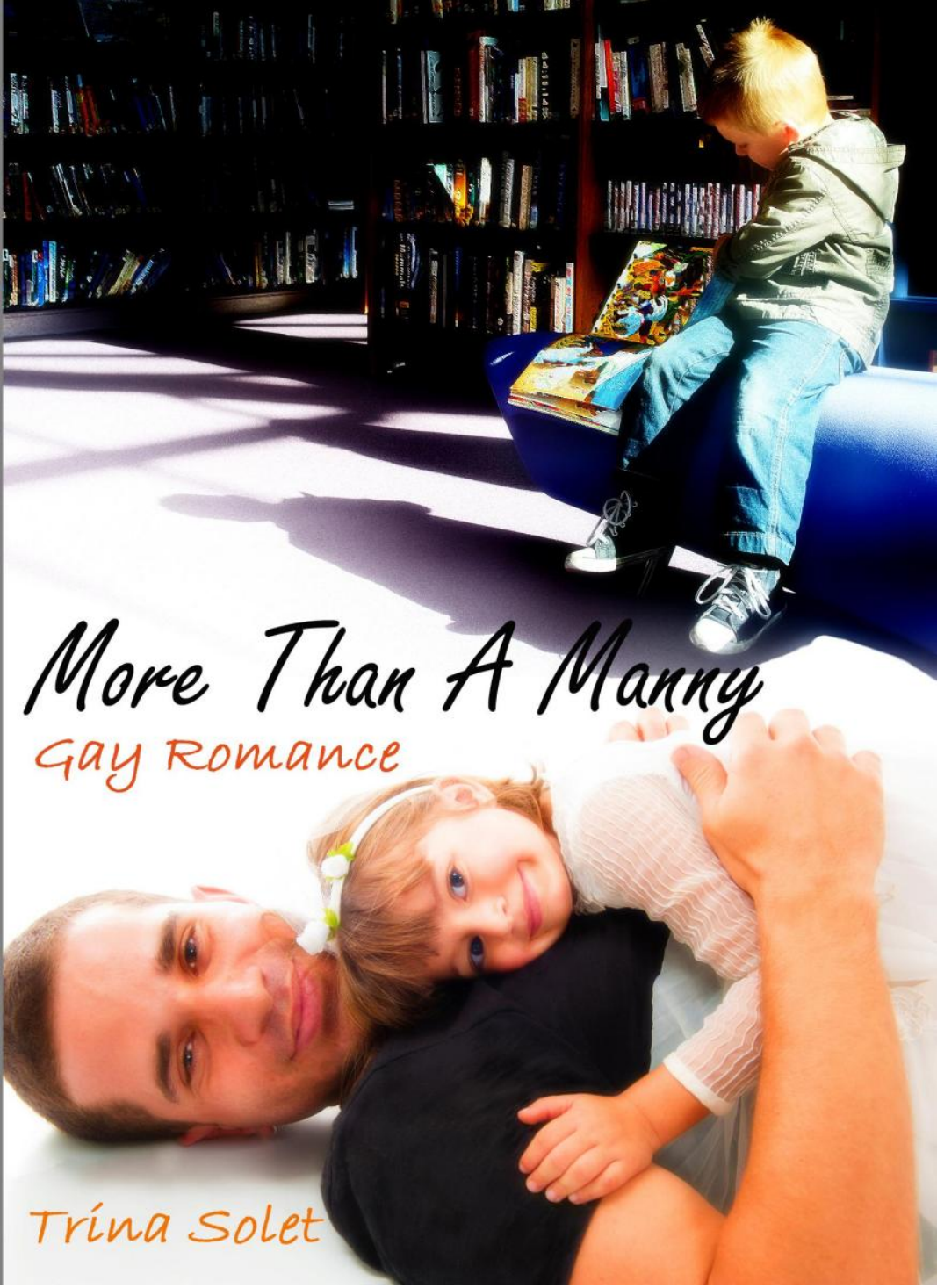

More Than A Manny

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

More Than A Manny: Gay Romance
By Trina Solet
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More Than A Manny
Gay Romance

By Trina Solet

Chapter 1

At the age of eighteen, Brent Leighton was living the life of a spoiled, rich boy. In reality, he was a poor boy. He just didn't know it yet. It was only after his parents died that he found out the state of his family's finances. Mr. and Mrs. Leighton had been better at spending money than making it. A few disastrous investments and it was all gone, like water down the drain.

For their twentieth anniversary, Brent's parents had gone on a luxury, Mediterranean cruise to relive their glory days. It had been planned for and paid for long ago. They were hiding the truth of their financial situation from everyone, including Brent. As long as they could, his parents wanted to live the high life, pretend that it was their honeymoon cruise all over again, and that they didn't have a care in the world. They died during this last hurrah. While they were taking a side trip to Cyprus, the small boat they were in capsized. Until their bodies were recovered, Brent held out hope that his mom and dad might have made their way to shore somehow.

The bad news he received about the empty bank accounts and depleted credit lines didn't have much sting to it. In his grief, he couldn't even understand why the lawyer and the accountant kept bothering him about money. But when he was told he would have to leave school and find his own place to live, start working to support himself, Brent woke up to reality slapping him in the face.

At first there were things he could sell to keep himself going. Some of his friends helped him out for a while. But as his money ran out, his friends started to avoid him. The jobs he managed to get paid little and didn't last. And every job he failed to keep was another bad reference. As his resources dwindled, he panicked. He was starting to consider offers that couldn't be called honest work. Brent was tall, blond and muscular. His good looks combined with his desperation attracted those kinds of unsavory offers from men who couldn't have him any other way. He had been tempted to say yes more than once, but he had only recently started having sex with guys. It seemed wrong to turn that into something sordid. One day as he was walking by familiar stores he could no longer afford, he came upon the answer to his problems.

Brent had known Greta casually and liked her. To her and many other people, Brent was still bi. He certainly wasn't going to tell her otherwise when they ran into each other, and she offered to take him to lunch. Brent had already skipped a few meals. This was the first decent food he had eaten for weeks. It was the kind of thing he used to take for granted. An expensive lunch was something he could only appreciate now that he couldn't afford to eat more than once a day.

While he scarfed down his food like a wolf, he wasn't shy about telling Greta how afraid he was of what life had in store for him. Greta wasn't like most of his friends. She was older and a serious businesswoman. He was hoping she would help him find a real job.

"I might have something for you," she said and invited him to dinner that night and then several times during the next month. She didn't discuss any kind of job with him though. They had a nice time together, and then one day, she proposed to him. Brent was shocked. But on thinking about it, he had to admit that it was the most decent offer he had received.

Greta was always busy and very serious about her work. Brent could tell that she was looking for a certain kind of marriage. She wanted a compliant husband who would make for a pleasant atmosphere at home and not challenge her. A husband with no money of his own was likely to be more agreeable. And Brent was gorgeous as well as good in bed. He knew many men chose their wives using those same criteria. So why shouldn't Greta choose a husband the same way?

Brent couldn't face an uncertain future and a life without money. He agreed to marry Greta, who was fifteen years older than him and independently wealthy. She had no family to call him a gold digger though everyone else did. Her two-year-old son from a previous marriage was part of the deal. Ricky wasn't a bad kid, but he didn't exactly take to Brent.

Greta was attractive, thin, severe and stylish, but that didn't matter to Brent one way or the other. What mattered was that she was generous and not difficult to please either in bed or out of it. She did want to give Ricky a little brother or sister right away. It turned out to be a sister, Georgie, the most beautiful baby in the world.

Unfortunately, Greta didn't get to enjoy their daughter for long. Soon after she had Georgie, Greta became ill. That's when Brent found out what that "in sickness and in health" part of their wedding vows meant.

Greta fought her cancer for almost two years. During that time, all sorts of new responsibilities fell to Brent. The hard decisions he had to make weighed on him. But when Greta was gone, Brent was even more terrified. He had been left with two young children. Thank God for Pamela who took care of the kids. She had been with them since Georgie was born. She stuck around for two years after Greta died though Brent didn't always make it easy on her. Then Pam went back to Costa Rica when she got married.

Brent had been making up for lost time, living the gay life. Now without Pam, he once again felt the serious responsibility he had inherited. That's why he needed a new nanny as soon as possible. Not

that he was alone. Brent had hired John to act as his assistant and deal with everything Brent didn't want to deal with. That included bills, paperwork, and all communication not likely to lead to sex. Then there was Quin, whom Brent hired because he looked so good in his dark sunglasses, standing next to a sports car. Brent's immediate offer of a job was answered with, "You see a black man next to a car, and the first thing you think is chauffeur?"

"Actually the first thing I think is sex," Brent told him.

Quin took the job when he found out how much it paid and the kinds of cars he would get to drive. Greta was seriously into cars. Though Brent didn't share her enthusiasm, she had bought him every car he so much as looked at. Most of them just sat in the garage now. With Quin there, they were finally going to see some action.

John and Quin had always been willing to look after the kids in a pinch. After Pam left, they insisted that he hire a full time nanny or take care of the kids himself. Brent didn't consider that a choice.

John arranged for a parade of would be nannies to show up at the house. Brent knew the interviews were going to be a chore, but a chore now meant freedom later. When the potential nannies showed up, John insisted on being present so Brent wouldn't screw up the interviews. Brent offered to leave him to it. John just gave him one of those withering looks he had perfected just for him. John was an uptight beauty with dark hair and eyes, tall and slim. He was a treat for the eyes only. His heart belonged to Quin. He took his duties seriously so Brent didn't have to.

The nanny interviews were excruciatingly dull and repetitive, just like Brent knew they would be. But then they turned into the manny interviews when a hot, young guy walked in and took his breath away. His name was Nate Ralha. His eyes were brown and magnetic. His direct stare mesmerized Brent. While Brent couldn't look away, Nate looked from Brent to John like he was trying to figure out who was really in charge. Nate had the body of Brent's dreams, a full mouth and close cropped, brown hair. His smile was warm and confident. Brent never wanted to take his eyes off him, but even more, he wanted his hands all over that beautiful man. Now the question was why a guy who looked like that would want to work as a manny. Brent wasn't sure he cared. He was ready to hire him on the spot. But John nudged Brent in warning, or more like kicked him. That was his way of telling Brent that he had to stop drooling and conduct an actual interview. Then he made Brent interview the last three nanny candidates instead of just sending them away. There was a further delay as John had a thorough background check done on Nate Ralha. Like his angelic smile, honest and gorgeous brown eyes, and perfect

body, didn't tell him everything he needed to know.

Even with the delay, Brent was pleased with how things worked out. But later that day, he overheard John complaining about him to his boyfriend. Quin had just brought the kids back to the house, and he and John were in the kitchen. The kids had run off somewhere to play so Quin and John were left alone, almost. When he heard them talking about him, Brent stopped just behind the corner to listen.

"That man thinks with his dick. He has no sense of responsibility," John grumbled to Quin.

"That's why he has you, baby," Quin tried to soothe him.

"Don't call me baby when we are at work."

"We're always at work, baby."

This time his words made John smile.

Then Quin added, "We'll be out of here by the end of the month, We'll start our new life, and you'll never have to deal with him ever again."

"What new life? What are you talking about?" Brent asked, coming out from behind the corner. He was feeling a little panicked. Then he saw that Quin was grinning at him with a gotcha look in his eyes while John's look was more reproachful.

"Damn you, Quin," Brent said realizing that he'd been had.

"Damn you, Brent," John said. A man couldn't say one thing to Quin without John jumping down his throat.

"Blame your shiny appliances," Quin told him. He pointed to the refrigerator door and then to the window in the small dining room. That's where he saw Brent's reflection when John opened the door to get a bottle of water.

"Damn my appliances then. But you are not going anywhere, right?" That's all Brent cared about.

John sighed.

"No, you big baby," John said, then he added, "Not that you deserve us. The hiring of a nanny shouldn't make me feel like a pimp."

That's when Ricky came into the kitchen. He had just turned seven and looked a little bit like Greta and a lot like her late husband, who was blond like Brent. Ricky's eyes were blue and very serious. Brent was surprised that Georgie wasn't trailing after him.

"Where's Georgie?"

"She's looking under all the beds," Ricky said.

"Why?"

"Quin told her to."

Georgie ran into the kitchen, breathless. She was four years old. She had Greta's dark eyes but her hair was a light brown.

"I didn't find them," she said to Quin.

Quin only smiled.

"Find what?" Brent asked Georgie.

"The nannies," she told him.

"You were looking for nannies under the beds?" John asked. He looked over at Quin accusingly.

Ricky explained what was going on.

"Georgie said that maybe the nannies were still here. And Quin told her, 'Sure. They might be hiding under the beds.' So Georgie went to look under all the beds."

"I couldn't find any," Georgie said.

"Are you sure you looked under all the beds?" Brent asked her.

"All of them!"

"The nannies are gone," John told her before Quin or Brent could send her on another wild goose chase. He stayed serious and disapproving while Quin and Brent cracked up. Ricky wanted to stay serious too, but he couldn't hide his smile. Georgie didn't know what was going on. She was just disappointed she missed all the nannies.

Brent gave the kids the good news.

"One of them is coming back as soon as John says it's OK."

"When? When? When?" Georgie pestered John.

"Soon."

Though Ricky was obviously just as curious about the new nanny, he still grumbled, "She isn't going to be as nice as Pam." He wasn't trying to dampen Georgie's spirits. He was just very loyal to Pam.

"It's not going to be a she at all. It's a man," Brent told him.

Ricky tilted his head. Brent could tell that the idea intrigued him. While Georgie jumped up and down with impatience, Ricky went away with a thoughtful look on his face.

A little later, Brent watched through the kitchen windows as Quin and John went to the guesthouse, where they made their home. They walked with their arms around each other, bumping each other slightly. As they stopped at their door, John leaned his head on Quin's muscular shoulder.

Quin had built up his body beautifully. Soon after they met, he showed Brent pictures of himself as a skinny teenager who got picked on one too many times. No one in their right mind would mess with him now.

While he watched them, Brent tried not to envy Quin and John. After all he wasn't that kind of guy. He wasn't pining for that one, perfect man. In fact, when Brent hired the two of them, he was hoping he would get some extra benefits from having two hot guys close at hand. But instead of getting some privileges, Brent had to watch them shack up with each other in his guesthouse while they cut him out

completely. That's why he needed that manny hired pronto. He refused to be the third wheel in his own house. He must have said this aloud because from behind him Ricky said, "It's Mommy's house."

Brent turned to look at him.

"Yes, it is," Brent said. Then he thought about it and corrected himself. "Actually, it's not. It's our house."

Ricky met Brent's eyes with a frown. That was a claim he couldn't deny.

"Hey, make us some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches," Brent told him. "Make one for Georgie too."

Ricky sighed and started gathering what he needed. Brent helped by handing him the jars of peanut butter and jelly. Then he folded his arms and watched Ricky assemble them sloppily.

Ricky carried off the two sandwiches for him and Georgie. While Brent ate his, he looked around. Brent had never loved the house, but now he was used to it. The house wasn't the kind of place where he wanted to live. If it wasn't for the kids, he would have sold the house and moved to a penthouse. But he couldn't do that to Ricky and Georgie. He couldn't displace them. They loved it here. It was their home. Though it wasn't ideal for Brent, it did have a certain comfort to it, a familiar warmth. After a hard day's partying, it wasn't a bad place to return to. If John ever gave his approval, it would be even better with Nate in residence.

John took his sweet time checking him out, or at least that's how it seemed to Brent. It took days. Brent was even starting to wonder if he had imagined the way looking into Nate's eyes had made his whole body tense with pleasure, not just his dick. Maybe Nate was just another attractive guy who only interested him for the moment before the next one caught his eye. There was no way to know until he saw him again. If Brent's impatience was anything to go by, Nate had some kind of power over him already.

The happy day arrived eventually. The manny stood on their doorstep, with his bags, ready to move in.

Chapter 2

Nate first heard about the nanny job because he asked about live-in positions in the Bridgegrove area. Considering what an upscale neighborhood it was, he expected some domestic positions might let him live there. He certainly couldn't afford rent anywhere near the place. He found out about some personal assistant jobs, but none of those positions were live-in. He interviewed for a job helping out an elderly couple, one of whom had Alzheimer's, but he didn't get that job. Since nothing more suitable came up, he took a chance and interviewed for the job as a nanny.

Nate was seated in a large airy foyer, which was turned into a makeshift waiting room with the addition of assorted chairs. Seeing how many other candidates he was up against worried Nate. He was the only man, and he had minimal experience. As he fought to keep up his confidence, he tried to imagine living in a place like this. The part of the interior he could see was stark and spacious, meant to impress not put one at ease. What really awed him was the view he saw as he drove up. The house was elegant with a gray and white exterior and tall, narrow windows. It wasn't the most imposing house in Bridgegrove, but the grounds were something else. Every other mansion had artfully trimmed hedges, meticulous landscaping and a perfect lawn, like every blade of grass was arranged with tweezers. This place was almost like a park or even a forest. A closer look revealed the signs of careful maintenance, but otherwise it looked natural, almost wild in places. It made Nate want to get hired for the job just so he could spend time out there.

The next pleasant surprise was the children's father. He was unexpectedly young and stunningly attractive. His assistant was hot too. But while the assistant, John, was dark and slender, Brent Leighton was blond with brown eyes and had a more muscular physique. He was sitting behind a magnificent desk, and he started grinning as soon as Nate walked into his office. If this wasn't a job interview, Nate would have started flirting with him already. Instead, he admired the much more welcoming decor of this room compared to the foyer. The windows let in plenty of light making caramel colored wood glow where the sun hit it. Shelves of books and binders lined one wall. On another wall, paneling and shelves for display were done in some sort of exotic, patterned wood. But Brent Leighton couldn't be ignored in favor of furniture for very long. Getting up, he came to greet Nate and shake hands with him for longer than was necessary. Now that Brent was standing, Nate could tell that he was tall with a beautifully muscled body. It would be a treat to work for someone like that. But Nate wasn't sure he even had the basic qualifications for

being a nanny. He only took care of his cousins when his aunt worked long hours.

The interview was a little strange with Brent and his assistant talking over each other. Brent was asking personal questions more appropriate for a date while John was more interested in Nate's qualifications and references. In the confusion, Nate wasn't sure what kind of impression he made, but somehow he still got the job. He suspected that it had something to do with the way his future employer looked at him. It was like Brent was a big, beautiful shark and Nate was his dinner. Nate wasn't worried about that. He knew he could handle himself. Plus anyone who made his intentions so obvious couldn't be all bad.

Instead of worrying about why he was hired, Nate was curious about the vibe he got from both Brent Leighton and his assistant. His interest in Nate made it obvious that Brent was either gay or bi, but his assistant was reserved and businesslike and not as easy to read. Nate wondered if they were lovers.

Some of Nate's questions were answered when he arrived with his belongings in front of his new home and workplace. His beat up old Toyota Cressida parked in front of a house like that one made for a strange sight. Before Nate had a chance to knock on those giant, double doors, Brent opened the door eagerly. Behind him, John rolled his eyes. There was another man with them in the foyer. As Nate set his bags down, Brent did the introductions.

"As you know, this is my butler, Jonesey."

"I'm not your butler, and my name is John."

"This is Quincy, my driver and bodyguard."

Nate looked over at the man Brent had just introduced and waited for him to confirm or correct what Brent said about him. He did a little bit of both.

"It's Quin, and I'm only an unwilling bodyguard because everyone and their mother wants to beat his ass, starting with Jonesey here. Can't let the man who signs the paychecks get offed."

Based on the look on John's face, Nate decided that Quin might not be a source of reliable information either.

"I put the two of them together," Brent bragged.

Nate looked at Quin and John and wondered if they were a couple or if this was just more misinformation.

"You mean when you tried to get us both into bed for a threesome, and we told you where you could stick it?" John said.

"If only I could stick it up my own ass, I would be the happiest man in the world."

This kind of uncensored talk made Nate ask when the kids were due

home. The only one who heard his question was Quin. He told Nate that he would be picking them up a little later. While Brent bickered with his assistant, Nate looked around. He was even more interested in his surroundings now that he was going to be living and working there. The place was both minimalist and opulent as one walked in, but the office had been inviting in its own way. The entry and a large open area beyond were decorated in a contrasting combination of wood stained a dark, coffee brown and furniture upholstered in creamy white. There were touches of smoky, dark gray glass. A geometric pattern was inset into the marble floor under his feet. Directly above him was that art deco, black crystal chandelier he had noticed before. There were art deco touches everywhere, but the style was eclectic overall. Nate wondered whose taste it reflected.

After introductions and bickering were over, Quin and John left, and Brent showed Nate to his room. As they went up the marble stairs, Nate admired the intricate detail in the wood of the railing while Brent admired him. The stairs ended at a circular loft that overlooked the entryway and its high windows. The upstairs had a more comfortable feel. The decor was still stylish in that subtle way that screams of great wealth but without the stark contrasts. The loft showed signs of use including an overturned cup and some toys under the furniture. From there Brent led him down an L-shaped hallway. The doors along the way had a geometric designs set into the lacquered wood. Nate counted at least six bedrooms. Hanging on the walls of the hallway were painted portraits of two children at different ages. Seeing Nate looking at them, Brent told him, "That's them. You notice that we couldn't get them to sit still."

Nate had noticed, and he didn't think that was a bad thing. He admired the way the children were captured while playing not sitting in some gaudy armchair. When they passed a set of open double doors leading into a large bedroom, Brent said, "That one is mine. As you can see, the door is always open." Brent tried to catch Nate's eyes with a leering look, but Nate just walked on down the hall.

Catching up to him, Brent pointed at the kids' rooms with less emphasis. A door across from the kids' rooms and next to Brent's was where they stopped. Nate's new bedroom was a good size but decorated way too fancy for Nate's taste, in pewtery gray and pale blue fabrics. The wood was very dark with the shimmer of hard candy. The style carried through into the bathroom. At least the bed was big and looked comfortable. It must have looked inviting to Brent as well. Instead of leaving him to unpack, Brent stretched out sideways on the bed. He looked far too comfortable and also attractive. Anybody would be crazy to ask him to leave when he looked that good on their bed. By lying there, it was like he was

displaying himself for Nate. His long legs and the rest of his tightly muscled physique called to Nate like no other in recent memory. Though Brent was dressed in casual but, no doubt, expensive clothes, it was too easy to picture him naked, every muscle exercised to perfection.

When Nate set a stack of his boxers on the bed, Brent made a grab for them. Nate was faster though.

"Those aren't the ones I want to get my hands on anyway," Brent said.

Nate almost looked down at himself to make sure he was still dressed. The way Brent looked at him, you would think he was naked. As Nate turned away to put those boxers in a drawer, Brent sighed. Nate wasn't surprised to find that he was ogling his ass. Since Nate wasn't shy, he just shook his head and smiled.

"Did you see those two?" Brent said and actually made eye contact with Nate. "I thought I had it made when I hired John and Quin. But neither one of them did it with me even once before they hooked up with each other. Can you believe it? And John is so uptight, even Quin can't loosen him up. When they started shacking up, I thought at least I would be seeing a new and improved John. Nope. Same old John, always on my case." As Brent bitched, he spoke like he and Nate chatted all the time and hadn't just met a few days ago and not spoken two words since then.

"You were hoping for a sex induced personality transformation?" Nate said while he hung up his clothes. They didn't even come close to filling the closet.

"I hope you aren't going to disappoint me," Brent said and gave Nate a heavy lidded look.

"I'll do my best," Nate promised, "to take good care of the children."

Brent's expression became sulky, but he still looked too attractive to kick out.

"If I'm hearing you right, I will have to take a serious look at my hiring practices." Brent turned to lie on his back and look up at the ceiling. Following his gaze, Nate saw it was covered in metallic decorative tile with a small dome at the center of the ceiling. Lights were mounted around the edge. That probably made for a nice effect at night. Some people had money to burn.

As Nate looked at the ceiling, he considered Brent's problem from another angle.

"Maybe you're too good at finding the right people," Nate said just as Brent was getting up to leave.

He turned back to ask, "What does that mean?"

"That you end up doing your best despite your worst intentions. You might have hired me for the wrong reasons, but I plan to do a good

job."

"I screwed myself again, is what you're saying?" Brent said not letting go of his main concern.

"I'm sure you get plenty of action elsewhere," Nate told him and looked him up and down to underscore his point. Rich and gorgeous, Brent wasn't getting any sympathy from him. "This way you can get some peace and quiet at home."

"Screw peace and quiet. I want a nonstop orgy."

"When are the kids getting picked up from school? I'd like to ride along," Nate said, partly to remind Brent of their existence.

"Talk to Quin. That's his department."

Since Brent gave him no directions before he left, Nate had to find his own way around. He wandered the halls, opening doors. He found an impressive gym and pictured Brent working out in it. After opening more doors, he stumbled into the garage. It looked more like a luxury car dealership. Nate wasn't a car guy so the only way he could recognize the make was to read the back. A Bentley and an Aston Martin were all he had time to admire before Quin came in.

"This is what you get to drive?" Nate asked him.

"I get my pick," Quin said. "Except for that last one. That one is Brent's."

"Is that a Range Rover?" Nate asked, surprised at his choice.

"Yes. Right next to a Maserati. His daddy had a Range Rover. Brent is sentimental that way," Quin said with a shrug, then he pointed at a sleek, black number. "This baby is my favorite."

"Jaguar," Nate said as he admired it.

"That's right. A big, black cat."

"Sounds good. I'm coming with you," Nate told him.

"Just keep it in your pants. I'm spoken for and so is the car," Quin warned him as they got in.

Brent was right about Quin. He did look good in his dark sunglasses, sitting behind the wheel. But he didn't look like a chauffeur at all, and not just because he was dressed casually. Quin had a commanding presence and an easy confidence of a guy in charge. It was hard to believe that he worked for someone like Brent. Nate found him to be tough but easygoing. As he drove, he filled Nate in on a few things.

"John does the paperwork. I do the real work. And Brent..."

"Let me guess."

"That's right. He does no work. What I don't do is baby sit. No offence," he said with a sideways glance at Nate.

"It's not for everyone. No offence," Nate told him.

Quin chuckled then continued telling Nate how things worked.

"I drive the kids to and from school, that's it. But me and John were

stuck babysitting for a while because Brent was dragging his feet hiring a nanny, until he had a look at you, that is." Quin looked him up and down appreciatively as they stopped at a red light.

Quin ranted a little about Brent, but he also gave out some useful information. He told Nate that Brent's wife, Greta, had died after a long battle with cancer. Nate wondered if Brent was bi since he was married to a woman. Quin told him that Brent ended up with nothing after his parents died. Though he was gay, he married Greta soon after.

"You do the math," Quin said.

From what Quin told him, Nate gathered that Brent was a party boy and a trophy husband, but now he was stuck with two kids. Nate was a little apprehensive about them. Was there any chance in hell they weren't spoiled?

About Ricky, Quin said, "That kid is alright. He's always up a tree or with his nose in a book. Or both. You'll spend all your time trying to keep Georgie from climbing up after him. That girl has no mercy. She's a little pest, and you'll be on pest control duty 24/7. I don't envy you. But Ricky doesn't really mind about her."

Quin told Nate that Ricky was Brent's stepson and that Brent had adopted him before his wife died. Ricky's father crashed his plane off the coast of Nova Scotia soon after Ricky was born. Ricky inherited some of his daredevil spirit. In Quin's opinion, that was what drove him to spend most of his time up one of the many old trees that made the grounds look like a forest.

"Greta liked them big and blond so the kid kind of looks like Brent, but he sure doesn't act anything like him," Quin said. "Georgie more than makes up for it. She's just like her daddy through and through. She's trouble."

"I'll watch out," Nate joked.

"Don't kid yourself. You're outmatched," Quin told him.

Nate was going to be able to judge for himself soon. Georgie was getting picked up first. She went to preschool then daycare. The daycare place might as well have been a gingerbread house. It was too cute to be real. In front, there was a white picket fence and flowerbeds in every color. Nate could see an elaborate playground in the back. The building itself was white with pink and blue trim and precious in every detail. It could have been made of sugar cubes and whipped cream.

As Georgie climbed in and Quin secured her in her seat, he told her, "Hey, G, you know who this guy is? He's the new nanny. What do you think of that?"

Her thoughts on the subject were summed up with an eager little "Hi, new nanny!"

Nate stayed turned toward her so they could get to know each other. She was four, and had dark, mischievous eyes and dark blond hair. Nate told her his name. She said, "Hi, Nate." When she said her own name, she didn't bother with the r. She chattered and Nate caught about every other word.

Ricky's school was the next stop. Georgie waved out the window as soon as she spotted her brother. He was seven, and just like Quin said, he resembled Brent, at least from a distance. On closer look, Nate could tell that the resemblance was only superficial. He was Georgie's opposite, but he was cute in his own, more reserved way. As soon as he got in, Georgie asked him, "Did you bring me anything?"

"No." Ricky sounded dour as he answered her, like he knew that this was just the beginning of an endless barrage of questions.

"Candy?"

"No. That only happened one time."

"Did you paint me a drawing?"

"You don't paint a drawing. You paint a painting. You draw a drawing."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Give it a rest, G. These two guys need to get acquainted," Quin said to put a stop to her pestering.

"That's Nanny Nate," Georgie said to her brother and pointed at Nate.

Nate knew he had to nip that in the bud before he was stuck with that as his new name.

"Honey, you won't be calling me that. Just Nate," Nate told her firmly then he turned to Ricky.

"Hi, Ricky. As you heard, I'm Nate."

Ricky looked at Nate curiously. After the introductions, Quin had to prompt him, "Say hi to the man."

Ricky did. After his initial staring, he only looked at Nate when Nate wasn't looking at him. But unlike Georgie, he answered all his questions about school thoroughly. Nate had a feeling he was going to like this kid.

When they arrived back at the house, Brent was waiting at the front door. Georgie ran into her father's arms as he called her "My girl". Ricky came up the front steps slowly, almost sullenly. Brent greeted him with "And my boy" and brushed the top of his head with his hand as he passed by wordlessly. Nate made a mental note to teach that boy some manners.

Brent had no instructions to give Nate, but Ricky was willing to fill him in on their routine. The first order of business was a snack. Nate

got his first look at the huge kitchen that would be a dream come true to someone who actually cooked. The counter was black marble delicately veined with white. The cabinets were almond white and stretched to the ceiling. The oversized appliances looked professional but with a vintage flavor. While he admired the kitchen, Georgie tried to convince him that ice cream was on the menu.

The kitchen was impressive, but it wasn't exactly well stocked. There were several jars of peanut butter though. More than one had been opened. Nate sandwiched some crackers with peanut butter and banana slices. Then he crossed his fingers hoping that the kids would actually eat it. Georgie gobbled them up. Ricky was more cautious but ate his too. He also informed Nate that Georgie would eat anything with peanut butter.

Next it was homework time. Nate watched over the kids as they sat at the breakfast table. Out the windows that almost surrounded the kitchen, Nate could see a wrought iron table and chairs sitting right on the grass. If they ate out there when the weather was nice, it would minimize clean up. Nate also made some plans for the other work he needed to do. Monday, he would be starting at his second job, and he was looking forward to it. Just as Nate was going over his schedule in his head, Brent came to join him. Leaning against the kitchen counter next to Nate, Brent looked him over thoroughly. Nate pretended to ignore the visual strip search.

"I remember you had some academic excuse for taking this job. Does that mean you are an egghead because you don't look like one?" Brent asked like he knew what had Nate preoccupied.

"I'm a part time egghead. I took a break for a year and a half so I could earn some money. I would be an egghead full time, but I need a job that actually pays the bills. And right now, I need to live in Bridgegrove somehow. If I lived anywhere else, the commute would be murder, and my car is crap."

As Ricky did his homework, and Georgie drew random squiggles in imitation, Nate elaborated on what he had told Brent and John at the interview.

Nate was working on his masters in history, and he had stumbled onto an opportunity he couldn't miss. While tracking down some original sources from the Revolutionary War, he learned about a private collection of documents from that period. It belonged to the late Professor Lester Pullman. After he died in the 1980's, it was all but forgotten and neglected at his house in Bridgegrove. Nate visited the house and found that Professor Pullman's elderly daughter now lived there. He offered to organize her father's papers for her and also use his collection to write his master's dissertation. But he needed to live in that area to be close to the house of the late professor.

"I figured a job that came with room and board would kill two birds with one stone," Nate told Brent. "I'm working on my M.A. in American History. Just started, really. And Professor Pullman's archive can help me. It's something else. He was well-off, and he could spend serious money on buying old journals, letters, documents relating to the Revolutionary War. His daughter didn't even know what she had. She's in her seventies, a nice lady. I made a deal with her. I would put the papers in order in exchange for a small fee and access to his materials for my own research for my thesis. She is going to donate a lot of it, but she wants to keep the professors own writing for possible publication. I have to sort through all that."

"Boring and boring," Brent said. But from his expressive eyes, it was clear that he had listened to everything Nate said very attentively.

"It's not boring to me."

"So when do you plan to do all this boring stuff?" Brent wanted to know.

"During my time off. When the kids are at school and daycare. And don't forget, I have night classes three times a week," Nate reminded him. This was all discussed at the interview, and Brent had agreed to the terms.

"That doesn't leave us any time to hang out," Brent complained.

"I'm not your nanny," Nate told him.

"I'm way better than some old books," Brent claimed and bumped into his shoulder.

"Not to me. This is important work. I'm lucky I got this chance."

"You better save some time for me," Brent said as he stared at Nate intently.

"I'll see if I can fit you in," Nate said with a smile.

"I hope you mean that in the dirtiest possible way." Now Brent was grinning too.

"I'm going to check Ricky's homework now," Nate said to him.

Nate checked over Ricky's homework and Georgie's scribbles too. She was very proud of herself when he gave her his approval.

When Nate turned back to where Brent had been leaning, he was gone. Realizing that he was hoping to see him still standing there, Nate smiled to himself. Brent was so attractive and guileless that Nate couldn't help liking him. He didn't really mind his blatant come-ons. His open nature and lack of seriousness were part of his appeal, though mostly he was just plain gorgeous. In particular Nate remembered Brent's pretty brown eyes looking at Nate while he was telling him all that stuff he called boring. It must be something to have those eyes to look into while coming, not to mention getting to enjoy everything else that came with the package. He wondered if Brent would make a more aggressive move one of these days. Nate

didn't want to complicate his already busy life, or he might even take him up on it.

The rest of Nate's day passed in the company of Ricky and Georgie as they showed him the grounds. It was amazing to walk and walk and not reach the fence. There were some paths and benches, but mostly it was just nature allowed to do its thing with minimal human guidance. The flowering plants were few and seemed like they belonged. There was plenty of shade under the big trees which looked untrimmed but probably were. Between the trees were a few sunny, open areas. Nate noticed Georgie looking in some bushes along the way.

"What's she doing?" he asked Ricky.

"She's looking for bunnies."

"Bunnies are always hiding," Georgie complained.

"That's because you're always chasing them," Ricky told her.

"I want to play with them," Georgie said.

"Quin told you bunnies are wild animals. They don't want to play with little kids," Ricky reminded her.

"If you make so much noise, the bunnies will run away. Let's be quiet and sneak up on them," Nate suggested.

She went along with that plan for about two seconds, then she was back to being Georgie. As they wandered aimlessly, she monopolized the conversation, if you can call it that. Ricky corrected her a lot, but she didn't let him get away with that without a fight. Brent caught up to them at one point and begged to be saved from John.

"He's boring me with business," he said to Nate and the kids, pleading for their sympathy.

Ricky made a long suffering face while Georgie was ready to play the hero to her lazy dad.

"We'll help you, Daddy," she said.

When his phone rang, Brent handed it to Georgie to answer. She was happy to chat with John, but he made her give the phone to Brent. Brent held the phone away from his ear as John yelled, "Get your ass back to the office, or I'll fucking quit!"

Georgie burst into a cute little laugh while Ricky looked guilty for hearing bad words.

"You didn't hear that," Nate told them. Only Ricky took him seriously. To Brent he said, "So John has a temper."

"I bring out the worst in him," Brent admitted with a smile and made no move to do as he was told.

"Get going already," Nate told him.

Brent saluted Nate crisply, kissed Georgie and Ricky on the tops of their heads and ran back to the house.

"You can do that? Pam couldn't make Brent do things," Ricky said

almost like he thought it might be a special power Nate had.

"Not really. That was just a fluke." Nate wanted to ask Ricky why he didn't call Brent Dad, but Ricky spotted Georgie trying to climb a tree and went over to pull her down. Of course that started a wrestling match and a screaming fit from Georgie. She was laughing again pretty soon though. The kids chased each other for a while and made Nate tired just from watching them.

It was evening, and Nate was poking around in the kitchen when Brent came in. Georgie had asked for a snack, and that made Nate aware that it was dinnertime. He looked for something that needed minimal prep work or that he could just heat up, but he didn't see any suitable dinner options. When he mentioned this to Brent, he shrugged and said, "So what are you going to cook us?" He hopped up to sit on the kitchen counter. Nate was again struck by how attractive and almost irresistible he was. Nate looked away from those warm brown eyes and down to Brent's long legs in jeans, crossed at the ankles, his feet bare. Nate wanted to see those legs out of those jeans. But now it was time to deal with dinner.

"I told you at the interview that I can't cook," Nate reminded him.

"I wasn't listening. I was busy imagining you naked and then arranging you in different sex positions."

"Can you cook?" Nate asked.

"Come on, be serious," Brent said like expecting him to have any useful abilities was a ridiculous idea.

"What about Quin and John?"

"Yes, they can cook, but they went somewhere."

"We have to feed those kids something. What did you do before?" Nate asked.

"Me? Nothing. Pam cooked."

"I'll dig around some more," Nate decided and turned back to give the huge fridge another try.

Brent had a different idea as he came to lean on the fridge door so he could stand close to Nate. He ran his hand along the edge of Nate's shirt sleeve and said, "Let's go out."

"The kids too right?" Nate said since Brent sounded more like he was asking him out on a date.

"If they must."

"I'll get them ready," Nate said.

And he did know how to make a few basic things like pasta with sauce as long as a box and a jar were involved. He just didn't want Brent to get more out of him than he was paying for – in more ways than one.

While Nate got the kids ready, Brent went to his room to change. And he did know how to cook a little. It was fun as long as he did it only when he felt like it and maybe experimented a little. Tonight he felt like going out with Nate even if it was just a family night and not something more adult and intimate. Normally he would have gone out by now to hang out with the guys, wasting some hours before it was late enough to show up at the clubs. Brent wouldn't have been back home till late or early. Today was different. He didn't want to miss out on spending time with Nate. And going out with the kids was always fun. Maybe even too much fun for Nate's first day on the job. But Nate seemed like a guy who could handle himself. His calm, strong demeanor was just one of his many attractive qualities.

Brent put on a white dress shirt with a jacket and no tie. When he saw Nate and the kids coming down the stairs, he asked Nate, "Why didn't you dress up?"

Nate hadn't changed his clothes at all. He still wore jeans and that checkered shirt with snaps instead of buttons. He looked hot, but Brent wanted to see him put in a little effort.

"We are going out to eat with kids," Nate said like that was any excuse.

"Why didn't you dress them up too? Ricky looks damn cute in a suit," Brent said.

Ricky frowned at him as he came down the stairs.

Georgie said, "I want to dress up." She ran in circles around Brent, who tried to catch her. She was wearing a denim skirt with random, colorful buttons sewn in all over and a shirt with a picture of balloons on the front. Ricky wore jeans and a buttoned down checkered shirt. Brent looked from him to Nate as they stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"I hope we're going somewhere kid friendly," Nate said. Hearing all this talk about suits and dressing up must have worried him.

"Sure," Brent said. He caught Georgie and lifted her high as she giggled.

Nate didn't look like he believed him.

Nate had been right not to believe Brent. The restaurant he took them to wasn't fancy but it was definitely trendy. The decor was a mix of grungy modern and traditional Asian, Nate guessed Indonesian.

"This is not kid friendly," he told Brent as they walked up to the doors, and Nate could see it better. It was the kind of place where you take a date you want to impress if you are lucky enough to be able to afford it. Nate expected not to be able to recognize any of the menu items as food.

Brent carried Georgie, and Nate went in with his hand on Ricky's

shoulder. In a metallic mosaic by the entry, Nate caught a glimpse of a slightly distorted reflection of a gay couple with their two kids. It made for a nice picture. Nate looked over at Brent as he spoke to the very pretty hostess, who addressed him as Mr. Leighton as soon as they walked in. One thing was for sure, wearing a suit and holding Georgie, Brent looked amazing. Nate wasn't sure he could get in dressed the way he was. Luckily the place didn't have a dress code, and they got a table quickly. Nate wondered if it was Brent's influence. He did ask for a table in the middle of everything.

"A table out of the way would be better so we don't disturb too many of the other patrons," Nate said to the hostess.

The hostess looked at Brent for the decision.

"Whatever he says," Brent told her.

Once they went in, Brent gave the seating arrangement no thought, but Nate decided that it was best if the kids sat across from each other. That put Brent and Nate on opposite sides of the table as well, and that was probably also for the best. You could call it a look but don't touch arrangement. It put them out of reach while giving Nate the best view in the place. Brent grinned at him like he knew what he was thinking, all of it.

Nate found that the menu wasn't bad at all, but as his mother would say, the prices were so high you could get a nosebleed. Ricky read some of the menu items aloud. He had trouble with quite a few of them. Puzzled by how to pronounce them, he looked at Nate, but Brent was more help.

"I like pineapple," Georgie piped up when she heard the words pork satay in pineapple sauce.

"I guess you made your choice then," Brent said.

Nate got a plum brandy braised beef, which came with a spicy parsnip puree.

"It says assorted vegetable crisps. Is that the one I like?" Ricky asked Brent.

"That's the one, and pecan crusted chicken."

When the food arrived, Georgie wanted to eat from everyone's plate. They each gave her a taste. She mostly ate with her hands.

"My Georgie is a dining nightmare," Brent said as he wiped her face.

She only laughed.

"It's not her fault she doesn't know how to eat," Ricky said in her defense.

"No one is saying it is," Nate told him while Georgie protested that she did know how to eat. She showed Ricky the partially chewed food in her mouth to prove it. "No one needs to see that," Nate said to her.

"It's fun to tease Georgie. She's a good sport. See?" Brent told him.

It was true. Georgie liked anything her father said to her. But soon

she gave Ricky's plate some attention. While she was stealing the crispy vegetables that came with his order, Ricky pretended he didn't notice. Georgie looked at her father conspiratorially and giggled. Acting oblivious, Ricky let her think she was getting away with something. When Nate gave Ricky an approving smile, he turned away, a little embarrassed. He seemed most comfortable acting the part of the grouchy, big brother.

"Bathroom!" Georgie announced suddenly and too loudly.

Brent sighed and got up to take her. That reminded Nate that he needed to know the procedure for taking a little girl to a public restroom.

When Brent came back carrying Georgie, he stopped by the table and nudged her.

"Now you say it," he whispered to her.

"Mission accomplished!" Georgie said and raised her arms in the air while Brent held her up.

"So what do you do? Do you take her to the ladies' room?" Nate asked once they were seated. "My cousins were both boys. I just had to make sure they washed their hands after."

Brent explained his own procedure for taking Georgie to the ladies' room.

"I just yell out 'Fire in the hole! Man coming in!'"

"And Georgie!" Georgie said.

"That's what she yells," Brent said and tickled her.

"I will not be yelling 'fire in the hole,'" Nate told him.

"Announce yourself however you like," Brent said.

Then Ricky spoke up.

"John and Quin ask a lady to tell the other ladies."

"That's a good idea. Thanks," Nate said to him.

Now that both kids were at the table again, it didn't take long for them to lose interest in food and start messing around. Their sometimes noisy antics earned them a few glares from the other diners. Brent didn't seem to care, if anything he encouraged them. Georgie went under the table. While Ricky seemed like he wanted to stay on his best behavior, he couldn't help crawling under the table after her.

When Brent did nothing about this, Nate leaned down, stuck his head under the table and told the kids, "You need to get back in your seats now. This is not a playground."

Georgie peered at him like she had no intention of taking him seriously despite his gruff tone, but with Ricky's encouragement, she was sitting in her chair again. Within minutes, she was trying to kick Ricky under the table. Her little legs couldn't reach him, but she could reach Brent's and Nate's knees just fine. Watching Brent and Nate try

to get her to stop kicking them, Ricky laughed despite himself.

"Sorry, Daddy. Sorry, Nate," she would say then she would be back at it again.

Finally Brent just took off her shoes.

"That should minimize the damage," he said and gave her shoes to Ricky. Now Georgie was in her socks and out of her chair. Ricky and Brent were playing keep away with her shoes while she squealed.

"Can we have the check, please?" Nate asked their waiter when he passed by. Not that Nate had any intention of paying it. He didn't even want to look at it. The waiter knew to hand the check to Brent. He didn't look at their bill either, just handed over a credit card and told the waiter, "Thirty-five percent."

Seeing that they were about to leave, Georgie started asking for dessert.

"We'll go to Bessy's," Brent said.

That got a cheer from Georgie, and Ricky's eyes lit up.

Bessy's was a hole in the wall ice cream sandwich shop. They had every kind of ice cream and every kind of freshly baked cookie to choose from. Soft ice cream scoops were served between two large cookies or three if you ordered a triple-decker, which was called a Messy Bessy. It was messy eating no matter what you ordered. That's why the ice cream sandwiches came with a side order of wet napkins. Georgie needed several. Maybe it lacked dignity, but Nate couldn't deny that it was delicious.

After they took the long way home, Georgie led the way through the dark house faster than Brent could turn the lights on along the way. She stopped in one of the sitting rooms on the first floor. When she pointed out the window, Nate saw why she picked this room. There was a fountain right outside, lit up with lights that changed color. Georgie called out the colors. It appealed to Georgie, but it wasn't exactly tasteful. The light show didn't fit in with anything inside or outside the house.

"Greta would kill me. I had them put in the lights for Georgie," Brent whispered in Nate's ear like he had guessed what he was thinking. "You made a face," he said to explain his clairvoyance.

Brent's voice made Nate's spine tingle. With Brent standing so close, Nate felt a strong urge to just lean into him. He pushed back those impulses. But when Brent went to sit on the sofa, Nate took a seat next to him even though there were other options. It wasn't as good as the full body contact he craved, but it was still nice.

While it had seemed garish at first, the changing light outside became soothing as it transformed in slow rhythm. It lit up the water,

the wet stone of the fountain, and the trees around it. Georgie was bored with the view already. She gathered a few of the knick-knacks and started playing with them. Some of them were definitely breakable. Of course Brent did nothing to stop her and stopped Nate when he tried.

"Let her. If she breaks something, we'll take it away from her so she doesn't cut herself." That was Brent's concession to responsible parenting.

"She has actual toys. I know because they are spread all over the house." Nate had seen a doll stuck in the sofa cushions, another one was in a potted palm in the foyer, a doll's head was propped up on a candleholder, the rest of its body on the stairs, and various accessories and stuffed toys were everywhere else. And this was all before he had even had a proper tour of the place. "I don't even want to know how much those tchotchkes are worth," Nate said to Brent as they watched Georgie playing with them.

While she was busy, Ricky looked a little fidgety. To keep him amused, Brent did something on his phone then handed it to him. Ricky took it excitedly and became absorbed in it.

It wasn't long before Brent turned and gazed at Nate. Leaning in, he nuzzled him. Nate gave him a look that stopped him dead.

"How many dates before I get some?" Brent asked him.

Nate was pretty sure the kids wouldn't know what they were talking about so he answered.

"Two. But don't start counting until you actually take me out on one," Nate told him.

Brent squinted at him then leaned his head on Nate's shoulder. Nate let him. It gave him a good feeling, and it wasn't anything the kids shouldn't be exposed to. Looking up from the phone, Ricky did stare at them for a while. He went back to what he was doing when Nate winked at him.

"Are we supposed to be keeping the kids up so late?" Nate asked after seeing Georgie yawn.

"I don't make the rules," Brent said, abdicating responsibility and not moving his head from Nate's shoulder.

"Who does?" Nate asked him.

"John? Quin? Ricky? Hey, Georgie, you in charge?" Brent said to her, but she was too distracted by her project to answer.

Ricky answered instead.

"You are supposed to be in charge," Ricky said to Brent.

Nate turned to him where he was playing with the phone propped on his knee.

"Are you complaining that you get to stay up late?" Nate asked him. "Because we can send you to bed right now."

"No," Ricky said sheepishly.

"I guess now we know who's in charge," Brent said with a smirk at Nate.

After a little while, Nate decided it was bedtime. They took one kid each and put them to bed. Nate got the easy one. Ricky knew what he needed to do and did it without much prompting. Nate did make him keep brushing his teeth even after he thought he was done. He would teach him how to floss some other day. Once Ricky was tucked in, Nate went to join forces with Brent against Georgie.

"Ricky is in bed, and you are still up. You know that's not right," Nate told her.

At least she was wearing her pajamas while using her bed as a trampoline. With Brent's help and sometimes hindrance, Nate got her to brush her teeth and climb into bed, not on it. Sitting next to her, Brent got her to close her eyes then he smoothed her hair until she was asleep.

He and Nate tiptoed out of the room. They were left alone in a hallway that could lead to either of their bedrooms. Nate said goodnight, but Brent accompanied him to his door.

"Don't want you to get lost," he said.

"In this place, that could actually happen," Nate said.

As Brent stepped close to him, Nate turned so they were facing each other fully. Having a choice, Nate would rather look at Brent than almost anything else. Brent lowered his gaze from Nate's eyes to his mouth.

"We are on your doorstep so I was wondering if I was going to get one of these." Brent leaned in but didn't kiss him. He stopped like he wanted Nate to take it the rest of the way.

Their lips were close. Nate could feel the heat of Brent's skin. He wanted to taste him, just let it happen. At the last second, he pulled back. He looked Brent in the eye and said, "Thank you for dinner. Maybe I'll see you around."

Brent groaned and slumped against the wall. He closed his eyes and said, "Damn." His wry smile as he turned to him made Nate smile too. He kept staring into Brent's eyes even as he said goodnight and closed the door.

"You better lock it," he could hear Brent say through the door. But Nate didn't. He just stood there grinning to himself.

Chapter 4

Nate woke up with flashes of Brent's lips, his eyes, his scent. He could hear Brent's deep, teasing voice. In that half awake moment, Nate would have given anything to have the man next to him, to be able to turn to him and hold him in his arms. Nate groaned at the absence of that body in his bed. That longing plus the almost kiss last night told Nate that he wouldn't be able to resist Brent for long. After closing the door on him, Nate had been too aware of Brent standing just on the other side of the door. The heat of the near miss still buzzed through him as he went to bed. His imagination was in overdrive making him too restless to fall asleep without jerking off a few times with Brent's name on his lips.

As he came out of his room Saturday morning, Nate was surprised that he was the first one up. The kids were probably making up for their late bedtime. While he searched for coffee in the kitchen cupboards, Nate saw John wearing a jogging outfit, running on the path toward the front gate. It wasn't surprising that he was an early riser. Before Nate got anywhere in his search for coffee, Georgie came running into the kitchen and not because she was jogging or hungry. Ricky was chasing her.

"What's this now?" Nate asked them.

"She took my book, and she hid it somewhere. Now I'll never know what happens," Ricky said pitifully.

"Never? You will when you find the book," Nate told him.

"No. I never find them."

"When Georgie gets bored with the game, she'll tell you where she hid it," Nate predicted.

"No, she won't," Ricky insisted.

Taking pity on him, Nate turned to Georgie.

"Georgie, give us a clue."

"A clue?" she said like she didn't know what that was.

"Is the book upstairs or downstairs?" he asked her to get things started.

She thought for a minute then said no and giggled.

"Why are you such a troublemaker?" Nate asked. "And more importantly, where do we keep the coffee?"

Georgie and Ricky pointed at a cabinet Nate had already checked. He shook his head. Nate had found a coffeemaker, but without coffee, it didn't do him much good.

"Fine, let's go look for your book. Lead the way Georgie," Nate said, but she refused.

"No. Ricky has to find it."

Nate knew that he had to make this fun for her so he came up with an idea.

"How about this, a new game? Me and Ricky will wear blindfolds so we can't see. You lead the way. OK?"

She didn't look sure, but Nate got the kitchen towels, which he came across in his search for coffee. He tied one around Ricky's eyes and another around his own. Georgie took them by the hand and led them. Nate knew she was leading them upstairs when he stumbled over the first few steps. The stairs were a nightmare, and she was very strict about peeking. Nate had to apologize to the kids for cursing several times.

Even after the ordeal of the curved staircase was over, the journey wasn't without incident. Georgie walked both him and Ricky into walls more than once. In the end, Georgie led them to one of the guest rooms upstairs.

When Nate and Ricky removed their blindfolds, Georgie smiled and clapped. Ricky gave a big sigh and started searching the room. Nate glared at Georgie and got another smile in return then he started searching too.

They turned the room upside down without finding the book. But Georgie kept giggling so they were close. Then Nate caught her looking out the window. When he went to the window and opened it, her eyes widened and she clapped.

"What have you been doing?" Nate asked her.

He wanted to take a better look below, but the window wouldn't open any further, probably for the kids' safety. The window opened just enough for Georgie to stick out her hand and maybe a book.

"Georgie, did you throw Ricky's book out the window?" Nate asked.

Georgie giggled, her version of a yes.

"What else did you throw?" Ricky asked, distraught.

"Lots of stuff," Georgie bragged.

Ricky was ready to go out there and see, but Nate stopped him.

"Not yet. We'll go on a treasure hunt later. Let's go wake your father so he can tell me where the coffee is. Then we'll eat breakfast."

"Then the treasure hunt?" Ricky said sounded excited for the first time since Nate met him.

"Yey!" Georgie celebrated while Ricky tried to stare her down. She was immune.

"First order of business is to find me some coffee. Georgie, go ask you dad where we keep the coffee," Nate told her. Bothering her sleeping father was her kind of mission.

Georgie proved that she was the right kid for the job. She didn't hesitate to go into Brent's room and climb on the bed. She leaned over her father and yelled in his ear, "Daddy, where is the coffee?!"

Brent jumped a little in the dim room. He turned over.

"You drinking coffee these days, Georgie?" he asked her, his voice sounding a little thick from sleep. He glanced toward the door.

"Yes. No. Maybe," she said and sat on Brent's legs roughly.

"OK. Don't break my legs. I'm up."

"Daddy's up!" Georgie announced.

Nate took the kids downstairs to give Brent time to get himself up and ready. Brent didn't take long to join them. He came into the kitchen wearing a black robe with black pajama bottoms but nothing on top under the robe. The robe was tied carelessly, and Nate could see a little bit of his toned chest.

While the kids ate their cereal, Brent made a big show of getting the coffee from its hiding place. There was an inconspicuous sliding door under the cupboard right where the kids had pointed before. The door opened to reveal a pullout compartment built into the wall. It held not only a selection of fancy coffees but also a fancy coffee maker, cups, and sugar both real and fake. Nate had assumed that an older, but still expensive coffee maker he found in one of the cabinets was what he would be using.

"I'm betting this setup costs more than my car," Nate guessed.

"I've seen your car. Every pair of my shoes costs more than your car," Brent told him.

"That's obscene. Don't brag about that," Nate said to him. "And don't dis the Cressida. It gets me from here to there. Most of the time." Pointing at the coffee making contraption as Brent showed him how to use it, he added, "And that thing can't get me across town so it better make dynamite coffee."

It was funny that such a small thing like making coffee could point up the difference between them. Brent probably never had to use a paper towel as a filter or reuse old coffee grounds in the hope of squeezing that last bit of caffeine out of them.

As if to prove him wrong, Brent told him a story.

"This was right before I married Greta. I was looking for Help Wanted signs when I found myself standing outside this coffee shop where I used to go all the time. They had the best coffee, and I was craving it like a junkie. I was hanging out outside, trying to decide if I should spend the change in my pocket on a cup of coffee or save it for something more substantial. Every time someone opened the door, I would get a whiff of coffee brewing and beans roasting. Then I noticed this guy in front. He was talking on the phone, sipping his coffee. A minute later, he dropped his coffee cup in the trash and hurried off. The coffee was right there. It was almost half full. It didn't turn over. It didn't have a lid, but it stayed upright so it didn't spill. I grabbed it.

The coffee was still warm, and I drank it. It tasted really good."

Nate stared at him speechlessly for a minute. Then he asked him, "Were you that poor?"

"For a short time after my parents died. I wasn't very good at it so I married Greta."

That was just as Quin had hinted, but Nate still wasn't sure if it was true.

"And look at everything I have now." As Brent said this, he looked at Nate sadly. Then he handed him a steaming cup of coffee and smiled.

Nate decided that, one of these days, he needed to hear more about Brent's life. As he sipped the dynamite coffee, Nate looked over at the kids. That reminded him of what they were doing later so he told Brent about it. Brent laughed at Georgie's antics without a hint of disapproval. Just as he was asking to join them, John showed up and heard him.

"I told you I need you in the office this morning," John reminded him.

"I'll miss all the fun," Brent whined. "Georgie, Ricky, John won't let me go with you on the treasure hunt."

"Daddy can't go?" Georgie asked John.

"No. Your dad can't play. He has homework," John said.

"Poor Daddy," Georgie said.

Ricky rolled his eyes.

"I hired you to do my homework," Brent said to John

"There are things you need to sign."

"Forge my signature."

While they bickered, Nate refilled his coffee cup and gathered up Georgie and Ricky so they could sneak away.

Brent didn't know why he had told Nate that coffee story. Something about the way Nate looked at him made him do it. Brent wondered how much more he was going to tell him. Under the influence of that direct, dark-eyed gaze, he would probably tell him anything. And he was amazed at how easy Nate found it to take charge of the kids. He showed no hesitation. It was like he had never felt that constricting in his chest that mixed love with fear and made Brent run from them. Nate had such easy confidence. Brent envied him and liked him for it. As Brent stood there thinking about Nate, John stared at him.

"So far things seem to be working out with Nate. Don't screw this up," John warned him.

"Did we get lucky or what?" Brent said to him. He couldn't help smiling.

John didn't say anything for a while. He just eyed Brent.

"You scare me," he finally said. "I don't like that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

"I don't know. It's new. That's why I don't like it."

"Are you jealous?" Brent accused him.

"Only if your look has anything to do with Quin," John told him.

Maybe it did. Brent remembered how John had looked at Quin before they got together. It was a look of longing that was both hopeless and hopeful. It was so raw, it scared Brent at the time. It was like John was wordlessly and unconditionally offering his heart to be either taken or broken. Brent had been afraid of what might happen, but things worked out for the two of them. John was possessive, and Quin was always teasing him, but they were a good match.

Now Nate was here, another dose of sweet torture. Last night Brent had gone to bed feeling frustrated but also kind of happy. Nate was so intense and bookish. Just the thought of him made Brent burn with unsatisfied lust. He was amazed that a guy who made him feel like that was actually right there, taking care of his kids. And it was his own fault of course. He had booby trapped his own house with hot, unavailable men. Thinking of Nate sleeping down the hall led to indecent thoughts, but it also gave Brent a warm feeling and a sense of peace he could never remember feeling before, or at least not for a very long time. Brent wondered what it meant.

"You are still mooning over him, aren't you?" John accused him.

"You like him too or you wouldn't have let me hire him," Brent accused him right back.

"I like him fine, but you like him too much."

"I like everyone for the first five minutes. Then I get bored and move on." That was how it usually worked anyway. But something about Nate went deeper. John was right to worry.

"Good, stay the course, and we won't have to do those nanny interviews all over again," John told him.

"You want me to stay shallow? Don't you want to see me happy?"

"Happy? Now you're really scaring me."

Brent had to admit it scared him too. Happiness seemed too much to ask for, but Nate made it seem within reach. It was like he brought it with him, like his duffel bag and his stack of boxers in varying shades of blue.

Just as Nate and the kids were heading up, two maids came in and spoke to each other in a language Nate didn't recognize. Georgie ran to greet them. They talked to her in heavily accented English, mixing in phrases in their own language.

"Are they here every Saturday?" Nate asked Ricky as they stood on the stairs.

"Yes. That's Lisi and Mona," Ricky told Nate. "They clean, and make the beds, and do our laundry. We're supposed to stay out of their way and not bother them. Quin said, 'Don't mess with those girls if you don't want to be living in your own filth.'"

As Ricky quoted this wisdom, Georgie's excited chatter could be heard from downstairs.

"Georgie likes to help," Ricky explained.

Hearing this, Nate went to get Georgie. Her kind of help was probably what Quin's warning was all about. Nate sent the kids to get ready while he introduced himself to the two maids.

After promising the maids that he would be getting Ricky and Georgie out of the house soon, Nate went up, got ready and then found the kids in Ricky's room. Seeing it in the daylight, Nate was struck by the nice, possibly vintage furniture in there. The wood had a reddish glow and was inlaid with intricate patterns. There was a telescope at the window and old maps on the walls. Ricky was telling Georgie that she wasn't dressed for exploring. She did have on a lot of extra jewelry, including several rings with oversized stones, bracelets and gaudy necklaces.

"I'm ready," she told Nate.

Ricky shook his head and made a face.

"We should put on our explorer caps," Nate told them. It was to help them get into the spirit of it. He already had a baseball cap on. "You have one, Georgie?"

Georgie ran off to her room. Ricky spent some time choosing between a pith helmet, a cowboy hat and a baseball cap like Nate's. The pith helmet and the cowboy hat both looked like the real thing, just smaller, not toys. After Ricky looked up at Nate, the baseball cap won. While they were waiting for Georgie, Ricky showed Nate some things in his room. After showing him his binoculars and the telescope, he reached for a book on his shelf.

"My dad wrote a book," Ricky said and handed it to him.

Nate was surprised until he realized that he didn't mean Brent. The name on the cover was James Morley. The book was called Flying Over Antarctica.

Nate read the dedication "To my Greta and our new arrival". Ricky

pointed to those words.

"That's me. I'm the new arrival. I wasn't born yet so I didn't have a name."

"That's great," Nate said. He could tell that the dedication meant a lot to him.

Georgie came back wearing a big, pink, floppy hat with butterflies on one side.

"That's no good," Ricky told her.

"It's fine. Her choice," Nate told him. He wasn't about to arbitrate a fashion dispute. "Get your gear and let's move out."

Georgie's gear was a gold purse. Ricky put a backpack on his shoulders and binoculars around his neck. At the front door, Nate stopped to give an inspiring speech.

"OK, explorers, this is going to be a rough journey, but I know you are a tough crew. Let's find that treasure," Nate said super-seriously.

Ricky nodded. Georgie yelled, "Yey, treasure!" like it wasn't all stuff she had thrown out the window.

Once they got outside, Ricky acted as their guide. He used his binoculars a lot. Even if he didn't know the way himself, Nate was pretty sure Ricky took them the long way around. They found themselves in front of a large, wild rosebush. Nate realized that there was a hidden space between the bush and the wall of the house. That's where all the treasure had landed. It wasn't easy to get back there. Nate guessed that's why the stuff was never retrieved by the people who took care of the grounds. First Nate had to keep Ricky from climbing right in and getting all scratched up. Georgie also disregarded the thorns as she tried to pick the pink flowers which were too high for her to reach. Nate plucked a few for her and stuck them in her hat. Then he had to figure out how to get in there with minimal damage. He pushed some of the branches away with his foot and used Ricky's backpack too until there was enough room to let the kids climb in. Unlike the kids, Nate got scratched up a little.

Behind the wild rosebush was a mysterious little space just big enough for the three of them to stand in. Treasure was all around. Some of it was stuck in the branches of the rosebush. It wasn't years worth of stuff, maybe a month or two. Nate guessed since their other nanny had been gone. Unfortunately a lot of the books had swelled up from getting wet. Only one or two still kept their shape. Those were probably the ones Georgie threw down here more recently.

"Georgie!" Ricky said, upset to see the state of his books.

"They look funny," Georgie said as she jumped to try to catch the ones in the rosebush.

"It's not funny," Ricky scolded her while Nate took over getting the

books down.

"You can still read them," Nate said, leafing through a few. Seeing that some of the books were old and had really nice illustrations, Nate was sorry to see them damaged.

Georgie was more interested in the other things she found. There was a small plastic clock with feet and insect antlers that would probably never work now. Gasping in surprise, Ricky took it from Georgie, who was ready to fight him for it.

"It's from Mommy!" Ricky told her.

All she said was, "Give it!"

Nate distracted her with a small, mother-of-pearl kaleidoscope that had somehow survived intact. It held her attention for two seconds. She grabbed a wooden biplane that could only be called weather-beaten now. Nate had rescued it from the rosebush. Georgie held it high in the air.

"That's mine," Ricky said, but he let her keep it.

Ricky's backpack was full now, but he insisted on carrying it as well as holding on to some of his more precious books for safekeeping. As they went back to the house for a snack and to drop off their loot, Nate lectured Georgie.

"Georgie, you are not to throw any more things out the window. Are you listening?"

She heard him, but Nate could tell that she was going to have trouble obeying.

"If you are good, we'll all throw some stuff out the window, better stuff, stuff that goes kablewey. But no throwing anything out the window by yourself." Nate was thinking they might make some paper airplanes but he knew that wouldn't hold Georgie's attention for long. Maybe water balloons would.

They arrived at the front steps just in time to catch Brent walking John to the door.

"Good work," John said and kissed him on the cheek.

"That's all I get?" Brent said as John left with a backwards wave.

Georgie ran ahead to herald their arrival.

"Look, Daddy! We have treasure," she announced as she ran to him. She had stuffed a few things in her hat and held it out for her dad to see.

"You are my treasure. You are my little treasure, and Ricky is my big treasure," Brent said just as Ricky came up the steps, his arms loaded down with his misshapen books. Seeing the books fanned out from getting wet, Brent asked, "Is this your handiwork, Georgie?" "Aha," she said with pride.

"Don't be proud of yourself. You're a menace," Brent said and tickled

her.

"That will teach her," Nate said while Georgie giggled.

As the kids ran inside to fight over the treasure, Brent looked at Nate accusingly.

"You didn't save me from John. Again."

"John is not the enemy. And the kids need snacks."

"Do kids need to be fed all the time or something?" Brent asked.

"No, you just water them once a week."

"I want a snack too," Brent said as he followed him to the kitchen.

Since the maids were still busy inside, Nate decided that they should take their food outdoors. Ricky knew where the picnic blanket was and got it. Georgie had emptied her pink, floppy hat and put it back on her head. As they walked to the kids' favorite picnic spot, Ricky held one of his swollen books protectively while Georgie tried to steal it away from him. To keep her out of trouble, Brent picked her up and put her on his shoulders. That made her happy. She grabbed at the tree branches as they passed under them and threw down clumps of leaves, some of which got stuck in Brent's hair.

The picnic spot was on the edge of a clearing under one of the largest trees. Ricky tried to read while Georgie tried to wrestle with him. He had to climb up a tree to escape her.

"I didn't realize he climbed trees in self defense," Nate said. It did seem to neutralize Georgie.

"She isn't allowed to climb, but she will still try. Ricky knows which trees are out of her league," Brent explained.

Nate confirmed that none of the lowest branches were within Georgie's reach. She tried but couldn't find any handholds. She gave up and started throwing stuff up at Ricky. Luckily she couldn't throw anything high enough to reach him. As they watched the kids, Brent leaned against Nate and pulled Nate's arm to rest over his chest.

"You know how to make yourself comfortable," Nate told him. It wasn't an objection.

"I do." Brent looked up at him, and Nate had to force himself to look away. He could still feel Brent's warm, muscular body against him. That was more than enough. Brent was holding on to his arm like he was afraid Nate would pull it away. Nate decided the arm could stay where it was. As he reclined with Brent in this idyllic setting, Nate wondered if this was really his job. He got to play with children and lie around with their gorgeous father. Nice work if you can get it.

That afternoon, Nate searched the upstairs unsuccessfully. After he continued his search downstairs, he spotted Brent.

"OK. Where did you hide the TV's?" Nate asked him.

"There is a big screen in there." Brent pointed to the dark, double

doors that led to an oval room with elegant but comfortable seats arranged for watching a giant TV screen.

"I found that one," Nate told him. "You can see it from orbit."

"I have one in my bedroom. It's mainly for porn. You are welcome to come and watch it any time you like."

Nate decided to ignore all the implications of that offer.

"And the rest of them?"

"There is only one more. It's behind a panel in the office. I'll show you."

"Three TV's in a house this big?" Nate asked in disbelief.

"Greta wasn't a fan of TV watching. That's why the kids have grown up mostly without it. We do watch movies in the TV room. But Greta didn't want 'their little, unformed minds stifled on a daily basis with the extended advertisements that pass for children's entertainment,'" Brent quoted.

"I guess she never got to see Adventure Time. But what's keeping the kids from watching now, other than the scarcity of TV's in this house?" Nate asked.

Brent smiled sadly.

"I don't like to reverse Greta's rules. It would be like I was trying to erase her from their lives."

"Not really," Nate disagreed offhandedly. "Depriving them of TV won't do them any harm, I guess. But you let them watch on your phone." Nate had seen him give it to Ricky to use.

"I indulge them a little. If you want to do things differently, I'm not opposed to it. Pam was happy to follow Greta's rules. I was too. You don't have to. I trust you to make the right decisions."

"Thank you," Nate told him. He had actually opened his mouth to say something else. He was going to point out to Brent that he made it sound like he trusted Nate more than he trusted himself. In the end, Nate decided there might be too much truth to that. Instead he decided that Adventure Time was tailor made for Ricky and maybe Georgie too. He would load up on some episodes and start corrupting the kids as soon as possible.

After the kids went to bed that night, Brent issued his invitation again.

"Come hang out with me," he said to Nate.

Since he didn't make it sound dirty, Nate took him up on it.

Though it was dimly lit, Nate could tell that Brent's room wasn't really a bedroom. It was a master suite. French doors with unusually placed slats led to a large balcony. Another set of French doors separated the huge bedroom from an adjoining sitting room, which went through to the balcony as well. The bed was luxurious, and the

headboard was a work of art. It went up halfway to the ceiling. Sections of wood in varying finishes had been layered and fitted into an intricate, sweeping pattern. Nate had to run his hand over it. Its design seemed to have inspired the rest of the decor. None of the pieces matched, but they all suited each other perfectly. After the headboard, Nate's eye was drawn to a large tapestry hanging on one wall. It depicted a hunter and a stag captured at the moment just before the arrow leaves the hunter's bow.

"Ricky and Georgie found that for me. It was stashed in the attic," Brent said of the tapestry. "Greta wouldn't have liked it. Maybe it was an unwanted gift."

Nate went closer to examine it. He wondered if it was an antique.

"Which one are you?" he asked Nate.

"What?" Brent's mind had wandered.

"The hunter or the stag?" Nate turned to watch Brent as he answered.

Brent opened his mouth. Nate was sure he was about to say that he was the hunter of course, but then changed his mind.

"The stag. See how he's just waiting there." Brent stared at the animal. Just as he said, it did seem to be waiting.

"Maybe he's about to run," Nate suggested.

"That's me too. Though not lately." Brent looked at Nate meaningfully.

To neutralize that meaningful look before he was forced to throw himself into Brent's waiting arms, Nate looked at some of the things that were displayed around the room. Two porcelain masks were sitting side by side on top of a dresser.

"We took our honeymoon during the carnival," Brent said to explain the masks.

"Rio?"

"Venice."

"That's not the good one," Nate told him.

Next to the masks was a sepia photo of two people in period costumes. At first Nate couldn't tell that it was Brent and his wife. Greta was dressed in a flapper costume while Brent looked like a gangster. He was holding a Tommy gun. His hair was dyed black and he had a mustache. Smirking evilly, he looked damn sexy. Greta wore a short, blond wig. Even in those matching costumes, they seemed mismatched. Nate wondered what the photo meant to Brent. It was the only one of the two of them in the room. Was their marriage a complete masquerade? When Nate wondered aloud what kind of marriage the two of them had, Brent didn't mind telling him.

"We made it work. You may not believe this, but I was a hundred percent faithful though Greta never said I had to be. I felt it was only

fair. She made things pretty easy on me. And she gave me Georgie and Ricky."

"So you married for money?" Nate said. By the look on Brent's face, he could tell that it bothered him. He had grown serious.

"I didn't know how to live without it. Whenever I went after a job, I felt like everyone could see right through me. They knew I was useless, that I wasn't fit for honest work. A friend got me this job at a café he co-owned. The manager didn't want me there, and I had trouble getting the hang of things. The manager said if I didn't quit, he would find a reason to fire me. He said I was just dead weight. I was afraid he might accuse me of stealing, and I would end up in jail so I quit. Later, a friend of my dad's offered to set me up with my own place, away from his wife and kids. He let me know that in addition to keeping him happy, I might need to entertain a few of his friends. I said no way. But I got scared. I didn't know what my answer might be when I ran out of things to pawn and ended up homeless. Then Greta came along and made me a nice offer so I said yes."

As he spoke, Brent looked to Nate for understanding. Nate could see how young he was even now. And in Brent's eyes, Nate could see the desperation that had consumed him. It was difficult for Nate to imagine having no one to turn to. Hearing about Brent's troubles, Nate felt grateful for his friends and every member of his family who would be there for him if he needed them. Thinking about how alone Brent must have felt, Nate wanted to reassure him, to take away his shame and guilt and any remaining fear. He put his arm around Brent's shoulders. Standing side by side, they turned to look at each other. Brent must have seen at least some understanding in Nate's eyes because he smiled.

Now that he had a clearer picture of what had driven Brent into a marriage of convenience, he wondered about Greta.

"But why did she want a marriage like that?" Nate asked.

"Why not? I'm a great guy to be married to," Brent said, but then he got more thoughtful as he explained. "I think she got burned pretty bad by Ricky's father. He was always off somewhere. Half the time they weren't even on the same continent. He was gone all the time, and then he got himself killed. The next time around, she wanted a more stay at home kind of guy. And I was happy to oblige."

"She wanted someone who wouldn't break her heart," Nate realized.

"And I never did," Brent said.

"Do you regret marrying her?" Nate asked and sat on the bed. Brent came to sit next to him.

"Not for myself," Brent said. He leaned back and put his arms under his head. Nate tried to ignore the bulge of his muscular arms. Brent was staring at the ceiling and didn't notice Nate ogling him as he

spoke. "I think she cheated herself out of finding someone to love so that she could spend the time she had left with that person."

"But that wasn't up to you. It was her choice," Nate pointed out though he thought it was sweet of him to want more for her than she was willing to settle for.

"At the end, she did tell me that she didn't regret marrying me," Brent said and turned toward Nate, who was leaning on one elbow next to him.

"You said it yourself. You're a great guy to be married to."

"Want to see what all the fuss is about?" Brent said. He spread out his arms and looked up at Nate like he was offering himself on a silver platter.

"You owe me two dates," Nate reminded him.

"I took you on a picnic."

"The kids took us on a picnic," Nate told him. He did lie down next to him.

"OK. I'll wait. Just tell me when," Brent said.

As if to prove he could be a gentleman, Brent only reached over to take his hand and brought it to his chest, not lower as Nate thought he was going to. Nate could feel the powerful beating of his heart. It turned out that's what Brent wanted.

"Feel that? That's for you," he said. "My heart is beating for you now."

Nate turned toward him, but Brent wouldn't meet his gaze. He stared at the ceiling as his beautiful eyes gleamed in the dim light. Nate indulged himself and watched him until his eyes closed.

In the middle of the night, Nate had woken up in Brent's bedroom and sneaked away to his own. Strangely, it was more disorienting to wake up in his own bed the next morning, maybe because it was still new. Mainly he was unsettled because his head was still full of Brent. The way Brent had talked to him seemed so intimate. Nate had noticed that about him before, how he seemed to give himself freely. He wondered if Brent was that way with everybody. It was a jealous thought. Nate wanted Brent's openness to be only for him. "It's too soon for that, idiot," he told himself.

It was Sunday morning. After he got up, Nate went in search of the kids. He found Georgie on the floor of her room, playing with her dolls. She was making them dance and scolding them if they did it wrong. As soon as she noticed Nate watching her, she wanted to make him play with her. She was willing to let him have some of her lesser dolls.

While she decided which dolls she would let him take charge of, Nate looked around her room. Just as Nate had noticed in Ricky's room, the furniture wasn't little kid stuff. There were expensive looking inlays and veneers in a lighter finish than in the rest of the house. There were also crayon marks and scratches, evidence of spills. Seeing him looking at her marked up desk, she pointed with her little forefinger at a corner.

"It's Ariel," she said.

Nate saw that her desk was inlaid with a figure of a mermaid on all four corners. There was also a mermaid lamp on her nightstand and two vintage ads featuring mermaids on her walls.

"Do you know how hard it is to find mermaid art that isn't indecent?" Brent asked from behind him.

"That's what Disney is for," Nate told him though Ariel was well represented. There was more than one Ariel doll as well as a bobblehead.

Georgie went up to her father and jumped in place until he picked her up.

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Brent asked her as she hung around his neck.

They collected Ricky and went down. From the top of the stairs Nate had been able to smell something good. It turned out that Quin and John were making Sunday breakfast together in the kitchen. Their first words of greeting were to tell Brent and the kids to stay out of their way. The four of them sat at the table and drank orange juice and coffee. At the stove, John and Quin were wrapped up in what they were doing and each other. Nate noticed how the two of them

worked together and argued over little things. Sometimes they sent a reprimand their way when Brent or the kids pestered them, but mainly they were just spending time together. When Nate turned away from them, he saw Brent watching him.

"You think it's as good as it looks?" Brent asked him.

"The bacon and waffles or the two of them?" Nate said. He knew it had to be something wonderful to be with someone like that, to make your own little world together.

Once they got the go-ahead, Brent and the kids practically sprinted to the stack of waffles by the stove. Nate followed with more decorum though his mouth was watering. Quin and John had already loaded up their plates and had gone to eat in the small dining room since the breakfast table wouldn't seat all of them. There was also a big dining room that seated twenty. Soon they were all sitting together and watching Georgie massacre bacon. She bit every piece of bacon on Brent's plate and her own but didn't finish any of them.

"Show that bacon some respect," Quin told her.

After breakfast, John and Quin had disappeared. Brent was chasing Georgie through the halls while she squealed. Before Ricky could join the fun, Nate decided to conscript him.

"Give me a tour of this place," Nate told Ricky. He had seen most of it but not everything.

Ricky looked around then took him straight to the library. Nate approved of Ricky's sense of priority. He had noticed the big library but put off exploring it. He was afraid he would get stuck there.

The double doors stood open, and Nate couldn't help but smile as he walked in. He inhaled the smell of books and took in the sight of the shelves stretching from floor to ceiling. As expected, there was a sliding ladder for the highest shelves, but it was secured with a sort of gate so the kids couldn't climb it.

The first thing Ricky showed him was the complicated lighting system controlled from the wall, with buttons on the bookshelves themselves or with a remote. Nate pictured himself coming in with a flashlight, just in case. For now the tall windows let in plenty of light. The carpet was plush with a black and beige pattern of swirls. In the center of the room were two big, comfy looking brown leather sofas. They were set back to back with a tall table between them holding two lamps. There were two big desks facing each other by the windows. In each of the corners of the big room, there was a different oversized armchair with its own lamp. Unconsciously, Nate picked out the one upholstered in dark green felt with an intricate, modern, brass lamp behind it. But, realistically, he was probably going to get more use out of the desks.

"I'm only allowed to take books from this shelf and this shelf," Ricky said pointing at the bottom shelf and the next shelf but only along one wall.

Nate saw that the bottom shelf held children's books. He saw *Pinocchio*, *The Boxcar Children* series, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* among others. The other shelf had books on nature and geography but nothing too serious.

"Those look like good ones," Nate told him.

"I've read lots of them. But sometimes Georgie doesn't let me read," Ricky said.

"She just wants to play."

Ricky sighed, and Nate laughed at him.

"Is there a card catalog?" Nate asked him, expecting an old fashioned one might be tucked away somewhere. "A way to find books," Nate explained when he saw that Ricky didn't know what he meant.

"This thing?" Ricky asked and opened a sliding compartment where only the monitor and keyboard were visible.

"It's the coffee all over again," Nate said. He looked up some books just to get an idea of what he could expect to find here. He found some things of interest, but decided to pull them off the shelves later.

"No, no, no," Brent said from the door just as Nate decided to move on with the tour of the house. "Who let you in here?" Then seeing that Ricky took this to heart, Brent told him, "I was just kidding. You're not in trouble."

"You're always kidding," Ricky said, pouting.

"But don't you see? Now we'll never get him out of here." Brent pointed at Nate.

"I'm dragging a bed in here and never leaving," Nate confirmed. That wasn't far from the truth.

Ricky looked like he thought that was a reasonable idea so Nate winked at him to let him know he was joking. Ricky rolled his eyes seeing that he was stuck with two adults who liked to kid around. He left them to it with a huff.

"That kid is priceless," Brent said after Ricky was gone.

"What's with everything in this house being hidden away?" Nate asked and pointed at the computer. Then he realized that his tour guide was gone. "Looks like you chased away Ricky. Now you'll have to show me around."

"You know how to hurt a guy," Brent said with a smirk. "But my tour doesn't start in the library," he informed Nate and then put his arm around him. He led him to a sunny sitting room, through a set of glass doors and outside.

"This is where my tour starts and ends," Brent announced.

Brent had led him to the pool. There was a large, tiled space with wood lounge chairs and sun umbrellas, folded for now. A fence surrounded the pool area. The fence was attractive but obviously not there to be decorative. Brent had to key in a code to unlock the gate. Stepping through, Nate noticed that the tile pattern was textured, maybe to prevent slipping. Beyond the fence, tropical plants gave complete privacy. The pool had a black and white mosaic along its edge. The weather wasn't warm enough, but the pool was still inviting as the water undulated gently.

"And to think that last year it wasn't even here," Brent said. Then he elaborated. "The pool came with the house, but Greta had it filled in."

"Seriously?"

"She was afraid of water. The way my parents died horrified her. They drowned. Even plane trips overseas were a nightmare for her. That's one reason she couldn't be with Ricky's father more. And after he crashed his plane into the ocean, she got even worse. She traveled all the time for business anyway. She would just knock herself out either with sleeping pills or tranquilizers." Brent pointed at the pool. "There used to be a flowerbed and a bench right there. I think it was almost like a memorial to her late husband. She sometimes sat there, more often after she got sick." Brent stared at the surface of the water like he could see her there. "Last year, I had it excavated so the kids could swim."

"Did it upset Ricky?" Nate wanted to know.

"Oh, no. He didn't even know a pool used to be there, or why it was filled in. He likes to swim, though Pam and I had to teach him. Greta never let him near a pool. And Georgie is a like a little fish."

"No wonder she loves the Little Mermaid," Nate said.

"Hope you have a swimsuit," Brent told him. The change of subject was marked by a roaming look over Nate's body. "Actually, I hope you don't. But in that case, you'll have to do your swimming after hours."

"Like an adult swim?" Nate said to bait him.

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"Is the pool heated?" Nate asked.

"Of course."

"I'll get the kids, and we can all jump in."

Brent sighed. Poor boy, he would have to confine himself to indecent thoughts and not actions, and Nate would too. He wondered if Brent realized that they were in the same boat, that when Nate denied Brent, he was denying himself.

Nate got into his swim trunks and had the kids ready for the pool. The kids jumped in right away while Nate waited for Brent, maybe a little too eagerly. Brent showed up wearing a striped robe. Nate waited expecting Brent to make a show of taking it off, but Brent kept

it on as he settled into a lounge chair. Nate glared at him.

Noticing her father, Georgie urged him to join them. Ricky looked at him expectantly as if silently conveying the same message.

"Should I?" Brent asked Nate.

Nate turned away from him and jumped in the pool. The kids got splashed so they screamed and splashed at him in retaliation. Another big splash followed. Brent had joined them. There was more retaliation for that. Soon there wouldn't be any water left in the pool. Once things calmed down, Nate could take a good look at Brent. He was beautiful from head to toe. His wet skin stretched over long limbs and perfectly built muscles. His back rippled as he played with Ricky and Georgie. Nate told himself to stop ogling him, but that message didn't get through for a few minutes. Though he couldn't stop, looking wasn't enough. Nate wanted to trace the outline of each muscle, feel it under his hand, his tongue. Just as Nate was firmly dismissing those kinds of thoughts, Brent turned to him and gave him a burning look. That look, more than his body, took Nate's breath away. Whatever it was that attracted him to Brent so strongly, it wasn't just physical.

They had their lunch poolside. Brent had gotten a phone call and left them so he could talk. Once they were done with eating and clean up, Nate and the kids got changed and went roaming through the grounds. As they passed the guesthouse, Nate noticed that on one side it had its own fenced-in garden.

"Quin put the fence around so the animals wouldn't eat John's vegetables," Ricky said when he saw Nate looking that way.

"Vegetables are yucky," Georgie said.

"If they were yucky, they wouldn't need a fence," Nate told her.

She didn't follow his reasoning.

"We're not allowed to go to the little house without being invited," Ricky said when they got close to the guesthouse.

"Like vampires?" Nate said.

"Vampires?" Ricky asked.

"Vampires can only go in when they're invited," Nate told him.

"Vampires aren't real," Ricky said like he was a little worried that they might be.

"That's right. Thanks for reminding me," Nate told him. "Let's go see if those guys will invite us in."

At the door, John made a show of hesitating for a while but then allowed them inside after warning the kids not to touch anything. When they walked in, Quin repeated the warning mainly for Georgie's sake.

Nate had been curious about the guesthouse because it was where John and Quin made their home. Unlike the main house, this was a

more human-sized space. It seemed just right for two people. Nate noticed all the photos of Quin and John together. As he looked at them, he felt pretty jealous of them as a couple and of the life they had together. Good thing Georgie had to be restrained as she tried to grab whatever was within reach. As Nate held her, he asked her about the pictures. She seemed to know many of the people in them, mostly Quin's family and Quin and John's friends. There were no pictures of John's family. Keeping himself out of trouble, Ricky stared at a picture of John as a young teenager with a really big dog next to him. A picture of Quin at around the same age in a karate outfit held Ricky's attention too. Quin and John had been a lot alike then, skinny, wide-eyed, and a little awkward-looking, but they had turned out very differently. And then years later those two skinny boys found each other and recognized they were meant to be together.

Aside from the many personal touches, pictures and things that must have been mementos, the decor was subdued and tasteful. Textured upholstery in beige and brown covered the couch and a large and comfortable but still stylish armchair. The rest of the furniture was similar to what was at the main house except for an old style recliner, which seemed out of place.

"That thing has astronomical sentimental value," John said to explain its presence.

Quin provided the real explanation.

"It was my dad's. My mom kept it for years after he died. Then one day she decided it was time for it to go to the curb. I wasn't letting that happen. I sat down in it, and I said, 'If it goes, I go. It's Dad's. You can't throw it out like trash.' My mom said as kindly as she could, 'Honey, he doesn't need it any more.' But I wasn't budging. So she told me, 'OK. It's yours now'. And now where I go, it goes."

John made a "What did I tell you" face, then he said, "I did make him get it reupholstered. This is what it looked like when he brought it in here." John showed him the picture on his phone. The recliner was patched and sad looking. The curb was too good for it.

"The original La-Z-boy," Quin said as he sat in it.

"Possibly the first one they ever made judging by that picture," Nate said.

"Could be." Quin nodded as he patted the armrest fondly. "Hey, check this out." He pulled the lever to make it recline. It did so with a creak and a thud. "Still works."

"We're not allowed to sit in it and play with it and break it," Ricky said.

Reminded of the rule, Georgie immediately decided to break it. The little rule-breaker climbed over Quin's raised legs to recline on top of him.

"It's comfy," she declared.

"You're crushing me, girl. What've you been eating?" Quin said. He pretended that she was heavy and he couldn't lift her off, and Ricky laughed.

Nate smiled, but he had felt a pang at hearing Quin talking about his father's old recliner. His own father's things had become precious to Nate even before he died. When his father had to leave their home because of his drinking, Nate would look for all the insignificant things his father had left behind. Those things told him that his father was coming back. They lied. After his father died, Nate both hated and treasured the things his father had touched.

While Nate was lost in thought, John took the kids to the kitchen so they could help him get lemonade. That left Nate alone with Quin.

"How did your father die?" Nate asked.

"A big car crash. It was on the news. My sister and I were helping my mom with dinner. The TV was on. We heard about this big pileup on the interstate, people killed, and we didn't think it had anything to do with us, just some stuff on the news."

Nate nodded. His father's death as an innocent bystander shot during a robbery must have been news too, but Nate never saw or heard it. His mother didn't allow the news on TV or a newspaper in the house at that sad time.

Nate realized that he was just standing there while Quin stared at him.

"You too, huh?" Quin said.

Nate gave him a sad smile of understanding, but he couldn't speak up. Sometimes grief could renew itself so suddenly. Good thing the kids came back in with John at the end of his patience with them. As he brought in a tray with the glass pitcher of lemonade and glasses, Georgie asked him to let her carry it.

While they drank and Georgie demanded more sugar, Nate wondered where Brent was. It was weird to miss him so soon, but it was just an honest feeling. Nate liked to have him around, to be able to look at him, to hear his voice and his laugh. And anyway, in Nate's experience, it didn't do much good to put a lid on your feelings. They would just spill over anyway. And considering how strong they were, it would have to be a big, heavy lid to hold those feelings down.

At the pool, Nate had been a delicious sight. They really did have to have that adult swim so Brent could kiss every inch of his olive skin. He wanted to feel those muscular arms encircle him and press him against that toned chest. He wanted to wrap himself around those legs. And to think that Nate wore those totally unsexy, yellow swim

trunks. Brent had to stop himself from thinking about taking them off Nate and throwing them into the bushes. If that's what they made him think of, maybe they were sexy after all. Nate could wear anything and never stop being fuckable for one second.

They exchanged quite a few looks while they played in the pool when not getting a face-full of pool water from the kids. Again Brent noticed how taking care of them was second nature to Nate. While letting them have fun, he kept a close eye on them. He wasn't a worrier like Pam, who was just like John in some ways. That's why the two of them got along so well. Nate was different. He seemed completely at ease letting the kids get crazy as long as they didn't do anything dangerous. Georgie's antics didn't faze him, and that's saying something. Ricky looked to him for reassurance, which he got because Nate was always calm and took charge without restraining them too much. Nate accepted the kids for who they were. He didn't try to make them like him. They just did. Brent had to grit his teeth so he wouldn't make some kind of insane declaration like "You have to stay with us forever!"

He really did have to be careful with his feelings. Brent realized that he probably didn't know how to handle them because he had never experienced this kind of attraction before. Unlike every other time before now, this time he was attracted to the man not just his body. Nate could just look at him, and it would bring out the most intense feelings in him. It was just a matter of time before Brent did or said something stupid under the influence of those eyes.

To clear his head, Brent went for a drive after lunch. The whole time all he could think about was going back. When he couldn't stand it any more, Brent turned around. He stopped at the Asian market and deli where they had the spring rolls Ricky liked. Loaded down with too much food, he came back to the house filled with noise. Nate and the kids were having a paper airplane, aerial battle. The airplanes were thrown from the loft to try and hit each other, which they almost never did. The foyer was covered with them. Brent was greeted with cheers and airplane attacks. One hit his ear.

"I told you not to aim for the face," Nate told the kids as they all came down the stairs.

"That was your plane," Ricky told him.

"That's my eagle eyed boy," Brent said. "Got your spring rolls."

They invited John and Quin, but they had plans to meet some friends for dinner. Brent didn't mind having Nate and the kids to himself. It felt very nuclear. Ricky was determined to learn how to eat with chopsticks. Georgie tried to eat everything with her hands.

"Georgie, sauce is not for wearing," Nate told her. By making a game

of it, he got her to improve her aim and use utensils a little.

Georgie's reward was Adventure Time on the big TV. Ricky was ready to climb right through the screen and join in. To Georgie, the show's number one selling point was the princesses. There were lots of them.

"I consider Princess Bubblegum a good role model," Nate said after they put the kids to bed late.

"Did you just say that with a straight face?" Brent asked him.

"Yes, I did."

Brent caught himself gazing at Nate, unconsciously tracing the outline of that full mouth. He could do that with his tongue. He watched Nate's mouth curve into a smile. Looking up from his lips, Brent found the warmest eyes he had ever seen. But when he asked Nate to join him in his room, he said no.

"I start working at Miss Pullman's tomorrow, and I need to catch up on some reading."

Brent caught his hand, not wanting to let him leave. Nate let him hold on, even squeezed his hand lightly.

"None of those sound like a good reason to reject me," Brent said. He tried to pull Nate closer, but Nate's arm turned to steel. His expression was sweet though.

"You're not being rejected. You're being postponed," Nate told him and smiled.

"That only raises my expectations," Brent warned him.

"Mine too," Nate said and gave him a sexy grin and an even sexier look before going to his room.

Another close call and all Brent was left with was his erection, his heavy breathing and his loudly beating heart. There was a message in that. Brent was sure of it. Nate was interested, but he needed him to ease off. Too much time together, too soon, and he would get sick of Brent. Brent had never been one to deny himself, but then he had never wanted anything as much as he wanted to be with Nate. He was the first man Brent had ever wanted to hold on to, and he didn't know how. He only knew he had to make it happen.

Monday morning, Nate was finishing his coffee when Quin joined him in the kitchen.

"Hey, Nanny Nate," Quin said with an evil grin.

"Oh great," Nate said while Quin chuckled at his discomfort.

Nate resigned himself to it, but only from Quin.

"Just don't let the kids hear you," Nate told him.

"We'll see," Quin said, refusing to commit to any acts of mercy.

Ricky and Georgie could be heard arguing before they made an appearance in the kitchen. Ricky was telling Georgie that she couldn't take dolls to school. Georgie had stuffed a few in her backpack. Ricky looked to Nate and Quin for help, but neither of them was willing to go to battle with Georgie over that issue.

Nate helped Quin load the kids into the car then waved to them as they drove away. Looking back at the house, he sighed. Brent hadn't made an appearance that morning. Nate left for his other job without seeing him.

Feeling sneaky as he hid behind a curtain, Brent watched Quin and the kids leaving and then Nate driving away in his awful car. He had meant to tell him to use one of the cars in the garage. But the last few days seemed so full, almost overflowing, like time had multiplied. Brent decided to call that the Nate effect. Thinking back on their time together made Brent realize that it might all be too much. Brent had told him things that he never talked about. He was ready to share anything with him. It scared him that he already felt so close to someone he had only known for a few days. And if he was scared, then maybe Nate was too. Brent would want to run if some guy started confessing his whole life's story as soon as they met, unless that guy was Nate. To be safe, Brent knew he had to pull back or risk pushing him away.

Brent was in the kitchen staring at his coffee and thinking about Nate when Quin came back.

"How goes your pursuit of that manny?" Quin asked him cruelly, like Brent's face didn't tell him everything he needed to know.

Brent only grumbled.

"He's one hot package. Must drive you crazy." Quin was just plain evil.

"Yes, it does. Stop enjoying my misery."

"He's just making you work for it. That's a good sign," Quin said as he held out a cup so Brent could pour him some coffee.

"It is?" Brent was suspicious because those sounded like encouraging

words.

"Sure. It means that he gets you. He knows not to give it up too easy to someone like you," Quin told him.

"I don't like you," Brent said in response to that mix of encouragement and insult.

"Yes, you do."

"Agh. Everyone has me wrapped around their little finger."

Nate parked in front of another huge house which didn't have half the charm of Brent's, and not just because Brent wasn't in it. It was an older house that had been updated in the eighties, after the professor died. Luckily the library was left untouched. Miss Pullman picked her reading material from the current best sellers and didn't go in there much. Nate started by familiarizing himself with the ins and outs of Professor Pullman's library, which was nothing like the Leightons'. Looking more like a storage room, it had been neglected for years, which was exactly why Nate was there. He had a quick look through boxes and crates and piles of papers. With a rough idea of what he would be dealing with, he came up with a system and got to work. He got so engrossed that Miss Pullman had to remind him when it was time to go.

By the time Nate got home, the kids were already back. Nate said hi to John in the office and went in search of the children. He found them sitting on top of the kitchen counter with their feet up. A peanut butter jar and a bag of pretzels were between them. Georgie was already a mess. Her hands were gloppy with peanut butter, and there was some on her face along with the pretzel crumbs all over her shirt.

"What are you two doing?" Nate asked.

"It's peanut butter and pretzels," Georgie answered enthusiastically. "It's the best snack. Daddy showed us."

"Did your dad show you how to climb on the counter?"

"Ricky showed me." She pointed to a chair they had used to climb up there.

Ricky was now sitting up letting his legs dangle over the edge. He looked like he was wondering if he was in trouble. Nate helped him jump down. He then looked at Georgie and wondered if she would need a bath. He decided to start with a wet paper towel. As he cleaned her up, he told the kids not to climb on the counter.

"If you want something that's high up, ask me or your dad or John or Quin, OK?"

"Brent is never here," Ricky said.

"Not true. All of us are away from home sometimes. Even you guys," Nate told him.

"He's gone a lot," Ricky insisted.

Georgie agreed.

"Daddy said he goes out to play with big boys. But he should stay home and have fun with us." That was Georgie's verdict.

"Grown ups need time with other grown ups," Nate told them both. But he was curious about what they were saying. Brent wasn't home right now, but since Nate had started working there, Brent hadn't gone out that much.

It was almost the kids' bedtime, and Brent wasn't back. John stopped by the office again to drop off some things. He as much as told Nate not to expect Brent.

"So he only stays home that much on the weekends?" Nate asked.

"Not any more than at any other time," John told him then he gave him a smile. "You can go ahead and feel flattered."

It seemed like John was giving him credit for keeping Brent at home for the last few days.

"Maybe he was just making sure that I would do a good job taking care of his kids," Nate said.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Come on, give Brent some credit," Nate said. He thought concern for his kids had to be at least a part of Brent's reason for being home. Nate could tell how much he loved them.

Without Brent there, this was going to be the first night Nate would have to handle the kids' bedtime routine by himself. First it was bath time.

Ricky informed Nate, "I'm a big kid. I don't take bubble baths. I know how to take a shower." He seemed very proud of this.

"You'll be shaving any day now," Nate told him.

On the other hand, Georgie wanted her bath filled with bubbles and toys. She brought an armful of toys and dumped them all in. Only some of them floated. When Nate went to grab a towel for her, Ricky had some instructions.

"No. You need lots of towels," Ricky told him.

Nate grabbed a stack of them, and Ricky nodded his approval. He was right. By the time she was done, Georgie's bathroom was flooded. Mostly Nate just supervised, and he still got soaked. There was no such thing as an innocent bystander when Georgie took a bath. He swore he would wear a rain slicker next time.

Playing in the tub hadn't exhausted Georgie enough. Nate still had to chase her as she ran around in her pajamas. Once he got her into bed, she wanted to talk non-stop. She did calm down eventually. Nate kissed the top of her head since she was finally being good.

"Kiss my nose," Georgie said.

"Why your nose?" Nate asked her.

"To make it warm so I don't sneeze when I'm sleeping and wake up."

Nate kissed her tiny nose and she giggled.

"Does your dad do that for you?" Nate asked.

"Yes," she said then she made a sad face.

"Do you miss him?"

"Yes. It's nice when Daddy is here. He's funny."

"You're funny," Nate told her and she smiled.

He smoothed her hair the way he had seen Brent do until she was asleep.

When he went to tuck in Ricky, Nate found him reading.

"You want me to read to you a little?" he offered.

Ricky showed him where he had left off.

Nate kept his voice low and read slowly. It had a soothing effect, and Ricky was asleep soon. As Nate watched his peaceful face, he didn't know how anyone could deny himself moments like these with his kids. Brent was missing out. Nate wondered what kind of fun could be keeping him away.

When he went out to a party or a club, Brent felt like he could wrap himself in its atmosphere. The exuberant, sexy mood of the place would become part of him. He would lose himself in the noise and movement and in all the masculine beauty around him. Tonight, Brent went to a party at the mansion of a friend of a friend. The pool was filled with guys fooling around. Someone was pouring champagne on one of the swimmers, who opened his mouth to drink. The dancers were out on the lawn, now brightly lit, now in the darkness. Brent stood on the edge of a sea of sweating, dancing bodies. He waited for the mood to seduce him, to make him one with the crowd. He craved the sensation, but it didn't happen. As Brent's eyes roamed the unruly groups of men, he found himself comparing every guy to Nate. There were better looking guys, taller guys, guys whose good looks shone through a crowd of guys doing their best to attract attention. None of them had any power over him. They would catch his eye, but they couldn't draw him in.

Brent had been ready to fall into Nate's arms from the moment he met him. Being around other hot guys only highlighted the power of that feeling. After a few drinks, Brent found himself thinking that it was like standing at the top of a cliff, seeing Nate all the way at the bottom and knowing that if he jumped, Nate would catch him. How could any other guy compete with that? Brent resisted the urge to go home and test out that feeling against the real Nate. He stayed on and enjoyed the show. Men danced, smiled, sometimes came up to him.

But Brent was only a slightly drunk voyeur. All the other men might as well be behind glass. Nate was the only one who was real, the only one who could reach him.

Chapter 8

After coming back from Miss Pullman's, Nate took his laptop outside where he could enjoy the outdoors and still do some work while the kids played. They were inexhaustible. It was like fresh air was their fuel. The screaming and yelling never stopped. When the laptop battery got low, Nate went in to plug in the laptop and grab some books. He met up with Georgie at the door to the library.

"Ricky got a splinter," Georgie reported to him breathlessly then ran ahead.

Nate wasn't surprised considering how much time Ricky spent climbing trees just that day. Nate was going to go back outside, but he saw Georgie go the other way, to the office. Thinking that this was something he would need to deal with, Nate didn't expect to find Brent already taking care of the situation. He didn't even know Brent was home.

"So you do have some useful skills," Nate said.

Brent only glanced up for a second. He was bent over Ricky's hand with a pair of tweezers. There was a bottle of alcohol and a bag of cotton balls next to him. A desk lamp was turned to give him extra light. Nate went closer to observe.

"Looks like your dad has it all under control," Nate said to Ricky, who was watching the action through a magnifying glass.

"Daddy knows how," Georgie said.

"Pam showed me," Brent said as he carefully worked the splinter out far enough to be able to grip it. "Aha!" he finally said and held up the tweezers in triumph.

Georgie clapped.

"Yey!" she shouted and raised her arms high to cheer her father's victory over a splinter.

Brent finished up disinfecting the spot and put a band-aid on though it wouldn't stay for long. Ricky examined the splinter with his magnifying glass until Georgie stuck her head in the way so she could see.

"You could have been a surgeon," Nate told him.

"That kid is a pincushion," Brent said. He looked from Ricky to Nate. He held him in his gaze for a while.

"Do you want to know if I missed you?" Nate asked.

Brent laughed then he just smiled.

"You're nice to be with," he said to Nate.

Brent had been good at taking care of that splinter. It wasn't a big thing, but what Nate had seen was just more proof that Brent wasn't hopeless with the kids, especially when they really needed him. Nate

was convinced that Brent wanted to spend more time with them, but something was keeping him from doing it. He was here for now, and Nate wanted to make the most of it. That's why he charged him with helping Ricky do his school project.

Ricky was in the small dining room with Brent and Georgie. He was trying to do his project despite their help. Brent mostly just kept Georgie occupied. While making sure some frozen pizzas in the oven didn't burn, Nate was on the phone with his mom.

"A nanny? I don't know," his mother had said at first when he gave her the news about his new job.

"You don't need to know. It's a done deal."

She had called him every day since then to see how he was doing and if he needed any advice. Now she was quizzing him about the house, the kids, and Brent. As he was telling her all about them, the kids walked in. Ricky went to the sink to wash glue off his hands.

"Hey, Georgie, you want to talk to my mom?" Nate thought that was one way for his mom to get those questions answered.

Georgie came over eagerly.

"Here, talk to Georgie," Nate said and held the phone to Georgie's ear, not trusting her to hold it. He prompted her, "Say hi to my mom."

"Hi, Nate's mommy!"

"Don't yell," Nate told her.

"She sounds cute," his mom said when she was done talking to Georgie. "Send a picture. Can you?"

"Sure. Here's Ricky."

"Me too?" Ricky said.

"Yup."

"Hello," Ricky said shyly.

"Hello there, Ricky. So how do you like my Nate?" Nate could hear his mom asking.

"OK."

"Just OK? Well, my Nate will win you over, you'll see."

"OK."

After that brief exchange, Nate took over again. When he was done talking to his mom, Nate pulled the pizzas from the oven and called the kids back to the kitchen.

"I need you for a picture to send to my mom."

The kids came and so did Brent.

"Why are you here?" Nate asked him,"

"You called us over for a picture," Brent told him.

Nate relented right away.

"I guess it's OK since there is no distinction between you and the kids." Then he had to warn the kids, "Hey. Don't attack the pizza. It's hot. Pictures first. Strike a pose," Nate told them.

Brent took charge of that. He picked up the kids, holding one under each arm. They both wriggled.

"Hey, no wriggling for the picture," Nate told them.

Georgie giggled the whole time. Nate took several shots. Ricky at first looked down, then he looked up at the ceiling like a little martyr. He couldn't hold out forever. In the end, he smiled as he looked over at Georgie and then again while looking at the camera.

When Nate sent the picture, Brent wanted to know what his mother said.

"She said the kids are cute."

"No. About me."

"Nothing."

"Give me," Brent said and took the phone to see what she really said. He saw that she said what Nate claimed. Now Brent texted her asking her what she thought about the guy. Nate's mom said, "Nothing much."

Nate laughed and showed him the picture he sent. It was a shot of the kids in horizontal view with only Brent's middle and arms visible. Brent demanded that he send another picture, and insisted on choosing which one.

"My eyes are closed in that one." For the next choice, he said, "Why do I look goofy? You made me look goofy." He looked at Nate accusingly.

"But Ricky is smiling," Nate pointed out to him.

That got Brent to like it.

"OK. That one is good. I want that one. Send it to me." Seeing the last picture, he said. "He's smiling again. Look what you did." He squeezed Nate's shoulder.

"You did it," Nate told him.

They polished off the pizzas right off the tray. No plates, less clean-up. Brent seemed to be in the mood to hang out, but Nate warned him that he had a lot of reading to do.

"I haven't picked a topic for my thesis so I don't know what I need. Professor Pullman had a lot of out of print resources. There is so much material to get through. I'm thinking I might do something on the mutinies of 1781 with a focus on the New Jersey line. Maybe the summary executions. That always interested me."

"Sounds like fun," Brent said sarcastically.

"My kind of fun, yes. I already found a letter in Professor Pullman's collection that refers to the mutiny. To have this kind of access, it's a dream come true," Nate said then he noticed that Brent was making a face.

"I know. You have a hard-on for history. Instead of having a hard-on

for me," Brent complained.

"Don't be jealous of history. And don't forget, I'll need you to put the kids to bed tonight. I have a class." Nate pointed at the refrigerator door where he had put his schedule.

"So this is like a favor I'm doing for you?" Brent said, ignoring the schedule and staring at Nate seductively.

"Looking after your own kids? No." Nate tapped the schedule again. "Three nights a week I have classes."

Now Brent did look at the schedule but not to read it.

"Greta never let us stick anything on the fridge. She said it was unsightly."

"That's what a fridge door is for," Nate said then he tapped the schedule again. "Memorize it."

"Is everyone the boss of me?"

"Only everyone in this house and that house." Nate indicated the guesthouse.

Brent pretended to pout.

"If you memorize it, I'll take it down," Nate told him.

"No. You can leave it. Everything can't stay frozen in time," Brent said, but he still didn't look at the schedule, only at Nate.

They collected the kids and went to the library. Georgie drew at one of the desks. Ricky was looking at a book about kangaroos. For a while Nate read while Brent screwed around on his phone and sometimes laughed out loud. When he did that, Ricky would look over at him. He managed to look both reproachful and curious about what was making Brent laugh.

Brent was pleasantly at peace as he spent time with Nate and the kids. Other people could look after the kids – Pam, John and Quin – but no one else could give Brent the feeling that everything would be OK. Having Nate there put things in balance, like a seesaw with a guy on each end, lifting each other up.

Brent looked over at Nate, so diligent sitting behind the desk. Nate raised his head and closed his eyes for a second. Without noticing that Brent was watching him, he went back to writing on his laptop. As he caught himself staring for so long, Brent thought about his plan to keep his distance so Nate wouldn't think he was some clingy creep. He wasn't sure he could pull it off.

Usually Brent would start to feel restless when he was in charge of the kids. That was enough to get him to enlist someone else to watch the kids so he could run away. Nate banished that feeling. Brent didn't have the urge to go out even when Nate was ready to go and leave him alone with Ricky and Georgie.

As Nate left for his class, Brent walked him out. Maybe as a reward

for staying home, Nate hugged him tightly and kissed him but only on the cheek. It was almost a passionate embrace anyway. Their bodies lingered close as lips brushed over warm skin. With a touch that was more than friendly, Brent stroked the back of Nate's neck for a while before he let go. As he came up the path from the guesthouse, John happened to see them like that. He waved to Nate as he drove away. Having seen the affectionate moment between him and Brent, John had to speak up.

"At least keep it in the bedroom," he told Brent.

"We haven't even slept together yet," Brent grumbled.

"Even better."

"No, it's not. I'm so crazy about him. I'm afraid that when we do it, I won't be able to keep it casual."

"Then don't do it," John instructed him.

"That's not an option. And maybe I can be trusted to handle my own relationships?"

"Not on your life," John said decisively.

"I guess this isn't a pep talk."

"If you two got together, you would only screw it up by screwing around."

"I haven't been."

"What?" John said, refusing to believe what he was hearing.

"Screwing around."

"Are you telling me you are being faithful to a man you just met, and you are not even sleeping with him?"

Brent hesitated too long before he answered.

"No. That would be stupid," he finally said.

John saw right through his lie.

"There is no hope for you," John pronounced.

Brent asked him to clarify.

"For me and Nate or just for me?"

"For you, no hope whatsoever. For you and Nate, maybe if..."

"Ooh, I got a maybe. From you, that's as good as a 'go for it,'" Brent gloated.

After his class, Nate expected to come back to a dark house. Instead he had to go through the whole downstairs, turning off lights in empty rooms. The upstairs was dark and mostly quiet. Faint sounds of a TV came from Brent's room. Nate saw that his door was open so he went over. Brent was sitting up in bed watching TV, not porn. He muted it when he saw Nate was back.

"I can see that history didn't put a smile on your face," Brent said since Nate was slouching and worn out.

"I went in late and had to settle for one of the bad chairs. Plus I had

to sit still. If you fidget, Dr. Franklin starts talking just to you like you're the only person in the room. That woman is a freak." As he spoke Nate went to sit on Brent's bed.

"She probably has the hots for you."

"Not everyone has the hots for me."

"Of course they do."

Nate shifted the pillows to make himself comfortable and groaned.

"Lie down here and I'll give you a backrub," Brent offered.

"A real backrub or two seconds of a backrub followed by groping my ass?" Nate wanted to know before he agreed.

"Whichever one you prefer."

"The first one."

"Feel free to change your mind any time," Brent said as he kneeled while Nate stretched himself out.

Brent straddled his legs but didn't try anything funny. His touch was perfect, firm and soothing, just what Nate needed.

"I think this might be my favorite way for a guy to come on to me," Nate mumbled as he enjoyed what Brent's strong hands were doing to him. "You're good at that," Nate told him.

"I've had a lot of professional massages. I may have learned a thing or two."

And Brent wasn't lazy about it. Nate didn't think he would be able to keep going for more than a few minutes, but he kept going so long that Nate fell asleep on him.

Once again Nate woke up in the middle of the night in Brent's bed. He was tempted to stay, but he forced himself to go to his own bed. He did take a good long look at Brent as he slept. He was so beautiful. Nate gave himself credit for having a will of steel to be able to leave him when he looked that good.

During the rest of the week, Nate was busy with his second job and his classes. Just as Ricky had claimed, Brent wasn't around much especially in the evenings. He was good about staying home when he was needed, but on other nights, he stayed out until early morning hours. Now that the novelty of having Nate around had worn off, maybe Brent was going back to his routine. On one morning, Nate did catch him watching the kids eating breakfast, or really fighting over breakfast. Georgie was trying to fish out the colorful pieces from Ricky's cereal. He had left them for last. Georgie ate hers first and now was trying to poach his. Brent had a longing look, like he wanted to join them. Nate didn't see why he couldn't.

On Saturday morning, Nate saw that Brent wasn't in his bedroom. Nate hoped that he hadn't already left. The kids were done with breakfast, the maids had arrived, and Nate had plans which included Brent.

Downstairs, Nate started his search in the office.

"I was looking for Brent," Nate said when he only found John there.

"Don't expect to find him in the office unless I tie him to a chair," John said.

"Should I assume that you meant for me to picture him naked?"

"Oh God, now I have to deal with that image," John said.

"Poor you," Nate mocked him as he left. Like picturing Brent naked was a terrible thing. Though Nate didn't want to picture him as much as actually see him and then do a lot more than look. But right now he couldn't even find him.

When Nate asked Ricky where Brent was, he was more informative.

"He's in his favorite place," he said.

Nate found Brent lounging in the sunroom. He was engrossed in something on the iPad in his hand. Since he didn't notice him, Nate could take in the view of Brent and his surroundings. On three sides, the walls were almost entirely tall, glass doors. The one solid wall was covered with some natural stone that looked like white coral. It was a pleasant room furnished in wicker and black, tropical print fabrics. At this time of day, it was only getting direct sunlight in one corner. Brent was still absorbed in the iPad so Nate took the opportunity to stare at him.

"You look comfortable, but I promised the maids I would get you out of the house." Nate actually promised Lisi and Mona that he would get the kids out of there, but it gave him an excuse to invite Brent to join them.

"Are you saying you're ready for some adult company? You're not

going to ditch me this time and leave me at John's mercy?" Brent asked. He made a point of not moving. He just looked up at Nate seductively.

"Forget it," Nate said and turned to leave.

"No, no. I'm coming," Brent said and jumped up.

Nate smiled at him.

"Don't act like you pulled something over on me," Brent said.

"You were the one playing games."

They told the kids to go get ready and meet them in the garage.

"Where are we going?" Brent asked as the two of them stepped into the garage, and Nate looked over the cars. Every car that had a back seat also had two children's car seats installed. It was a weird sight considering some of them were sports cars.

"We'll take one of these fancy cars you have sitting here and drive up Wayne Road," Nate said.

"To where?" It must not have sounded promising to Brent. Wayne Road would take them past some small towns and into open areas and farmland.

"Just somewhere different for the kids to run around," Nate said.

Brent wasn't won over by this vague plan, but he went along with it anyway. He told Nate to pick out which car they would be taking.

"And I have to drive. I'm the only one who knows where we're going," Nate said.

"When they invent GPS, that will all change," Brent said with a grin. "You know how to drive a stick?"

"What do you think?" Nate told him.

"Then you can have any one of the cars and me too," Brent said.

"The Aston Martin," Nate decided after he made sure there were kids' car seats in the tiny back seat.

"You might want to practice before the kids get in, you don't want to give them whiplash," Brent suggested.

"It's not a jet."

"Compared to your car, yes, it is."

Nate didn't really mind taking a spin in it without having to worry about the kids. Before he left, he told Brent to go help Georgie get ready so she wouldn't end up wearing anything crazy. Then Nate went out the gate and drove around, wearing a smile on his face the whole time. So that's what it's like to drive an awesome car. The responsiveness was even too good considering what he was used to. When he got back, Brent and the kids were waiting in front of the house. Georgie was jittery with impatience.

"Go fast!" Georgie encouraged him after she was strapped into her seat.

"She is never getting a driver's license, is she?" Nate asked.

"Not as long as I have anything to say about it," Brent confirmed.

Georgie wasn't old enough to realize the horror of what they were saying.

Driving this kind of car was like a dream. Nate couldn't believe how good it felt. As they drove out of town, the kids enjoyed the scenery of open fields and distant houses. Sometimes they saw a cow and got all excited. The cow sightings didn't win him any points with Brent.

"What's this place?" Brent asked seeing Nate give a turn signal in front of a roadside diner.

"It's a place where they have killer waffles," Nate said as he turned into the nearly full parking lot. The kids had eaten one breakfast already, but Nate wasn't about to pass up those waffles.

As they parked, Brent looked around at the other vehicles.

"There is a higher ratio of pickup trucks than I like to see," Brent complained.

"Don't be a snob," Nate said though he knew what he was worried about.

The diner was called Hugh & Hank's, and it was nothing special to look at. Beige vinyl booths with gray tables were lined up in two rows. Some faded photos were on the walls. The diner was full, but another family freed up a table just as they arrived. They grabbed it and looked over the menu.

"The caramel apple topping is unbelievable," Nate said.

"No! Strawberries," Georgie insisted.

"The caramel apple is..."

"Strawberries," Georgie insisted again.

"Suit yourself," Nate told her.

When the waitress came by, Georgie put in her order before anyone else.

"Well, you know what you like, don't you, sweetheart," the waitress said in response to her vehemence.

"Yes," Georgie said proudly.

Brent did order the caramel apple topping for his waffles. Ricky had trouble making up his mind. Georgie tried to help him by yelling, "Strawberries!" in his ear.

"Can he have blueberry, chocolate chip pancakes with whipped cream?" Brent asked the waitress. They weren't on the menu.

"Sure. We can make that. No problem," she said.

"How's that?" Brent asked Ricky.

"It's OK, I guess," Ricky said though his eyes had lit up at the mention of the blueberry and chocolate chip combination.

"And we want a dozen of those bacon, cornbread fritters to go," Nate put in just before the waitress left.

Brent was impressed to see how fat and crispy the waffles were.

Georgie ate the strawberries and whipped cream first then ate the waffles with her hands but only around the edges. She got her sticky hands on some of the caramel apples and some of Ricky's special pancakes too.

"I will teach her some table manners if it kills me," Nate swore to himself as he took her to clean up in the ladies' room.

When they came out, they found Ricky and Brent by the register. Brent's tip made their waitress raise her eyebrows then she made sure it wasn't a mistake.

"Oh, darn. My mistake. Sorry," Brent said and gave her another twenty on top of that.

"Come back any time," she said as they were leaving.

Taking nicely curving country roads, Nate drove them to their second stop for the day.

When Nate parked, making sure the car wasn't visible from the road, Brent and the kids looked around for their destination. Even when they got out and had a better look, there was nothing to see, or no buildings at least. On one side there was a wooden fence along a field stretching out well into the distance, with no gate in sight. Nate took them the other way. They were following a path, but a tangle of large bushes hid it from view at every turn. Running ahead, the kids enjoyed the adventure of the unfamiliar while Brent looked quizzical.

As the undergrowth thinned out, it was replaced by a forest of young trees that let plenty of sunlight through their branches. Brent heard the river, but the children didn't know what the sound meant. They walked among the trees until they came to a large clearing that finally let them see the river. Greenish from the reflected treetops, it didn't run smooth. Its course was disturbed by rocks and fallen tree branches. Since the riverbank was steep there, Brent and Nate held the children by the hand so they could get a closer look without falling in. The kids then chased each other around in a clearing that ran the length of the river and narrowed further downstream. Following the course of the river, they came across willow trees along the riverbank. Rocks jutted out in some spots forming little ledges that overlooked the water. As they walked by, Nate warned the kids not to get too close to the water's edge.

"If I see you anywhere near those rocks, we are leaving immediately," he told them. He knew those rocks could get slippery from the splashing water and weren't safe to climb.

Ricky took him seriously, but Georgie looked like she wanted to test him. Brent grabbed her by the hand.

"You'll get us in trouble with Nate," Brent told her.

Nate decided the best place to stop was where the riverbank sloped

gently toward the water. He saw less chance of the kids falling in there. After Nate told them to stay in sight, the kids went exploring. As Nate secured the bag with their takeout in the crook of a tree, he told Brent how he knew about such a secluded spot.

"A guy I was dating showed me this place. Strictly speaking, we are on private property. But me and him did more we could get arrested for than we are likely to today. So I think we're safe."

"Are you doing this to drive me crazy? Let's revisit all your old fuck spots!" Brent said as he took a seat on a trunk of a fallen tree.

"Keep your voice down. This is wholesome, family time, nothing like the wild make-out sessions I had here before," Nate said with a sigh.

"You brought me here to torture me." Brent knew Nate was taunting him.

"Want to play hide and seek?"

Brent glared at him.

"There are so many games I want to play with you," Brent grumbled.

Nate smiled at him. Brent looked up from his pout just in time to catch that smile. He looked a little surprised. Nate didn't see why. Guys probably smiled at him all the time.

Some shrieking from the kids made them both turn their heads, but the kids were just enjoying nature. Ricky was already up a tree. He was throwing down some white flowers to Georgie. She couldn't catch any of them so she screamed. There was also some jeering from Ricky as well as sound effects like the flowers were grenades or something. While the kids were demolishing nature, Nate and Brent sat together on the grass close to the water's edge. Across the river, shrubs and trees grew thick and wild, crowding the shore.

"He's a picky eater," Nate said remembering their second breakfast as well as other occasions when Ricky wanted something specific and wouldn't even consider something new. Georgie wasn’t usually as strict as this morning, and in the end, she sampled a little bit of everything.

"He knows what he likes," said Brent, who was obviously happy to indulge him.

"Maybe he should expand his horizons." Nate wasn't just talking about food.

"I don't like to push him."

Nate couldn't tell from his answer if he picked up on his other meaning.

"I noticed," Nate said pointedly.

Now Brent knew that Nate was talking about something else.

"You want to tell me something?" Brent asked and nudged his

shoulder to encourage him. He seemed ready to listen, which surprised Nate a little. Sometimes Brent seemed so young to him. Nate decided that instead of giving Brent his two cents, he would hear him out on the subject of Ricky.

"Why don't you want to push him?" Nate asked.

"I don't need to. You shouldn't underestimate by boy," Brent said with a proud smile. "He's just doing what he needs to do."

"And he needs to keep you at arm's length?"

"It's a wise child who knows his own father," Brent said with a sigh.

Nate turned to him in surprise.

"And what are you trying to say with that?" Nate asked.

"In my gloomier moments, I'm convinced that Ricky can see my failings. That he knows he can't trust me to take care of him."

"And in your sane moments?"

"That's when I know that Ricky is just a stubborn little guy who knows that I love him. And that he'll come around on his own terms." As he spoke, Brent had a melancholy but somehow confident smile on his face.

Nate was skeptical about his approach, but he wasn't going to argue. He had the impression that Brent's certainty about Ricky wasn't based on his own parenting skills but solely on his faith in Ricky.

"I like how you believe in that kid. You are a better dad than you realize. Why doesn't he just call you dad?"

"I think because I adopted him when Greta was dying. She told Ricky it was so he would have someone to take care of him after she was gone. Greta didn't consider anyone in her family good enough to take him. Plus most of her mother's people are in Germany, most of her father's in Argentina. She didn't want to send him so far away to be with relatives he didn't know."

"Doesn't Ricky have any relatives on his father's side?" Nate asked. He looked over to where Ricky was now swinging from a branch while Georgie was trying to pull him down.

"He has some, but they aren't interested in him. Greta made sure no one could get their hands on Ricky's inheritance. That eliminated the greedy ones. The rest just haven't bothered with him."

"He's lucky he has you." Nate was now looking at Brent. He could see how much he cared.

"I'm lucky to have him," Brent said. "Greta didn't want me to adopt him. When I asked, she said, 'He has a father.' I didn't take it personally. She was never able to let go of her late husband."

Nate had already guessed that. From the pictures in Ricky's room and from the back of the book jacket, Nate had seen that Brent was a younger, more attractive version of the late James Morley. Choosing to marry Brent certainly wasn't a way to move on.

Brent continued to talk about Ricky.

"It wasn't just her devotion to her late husband that held back the adoption. She didn't want to accept that she couldn't beat the cancer. Once it became clear that she wouldn't make it, she wanted to be sure Ricky and Georgie wouldn't be separated. And I finally got to be Ricky's dad."

Brent smiled sadly then looked back toward the children. His smile brightened as he looked at them. Georgie was holding a bunch of white flowers while she chased Ricky.

"I think Ricky is like his mom," Brent said without taking his eyes off the kids. "Greta didn't want to let go of her late husband so she refused to have a real relationship, a real marriage. She didn't want to accept that she was dying until there was no denying it. And Ricky doesn't want to admit that she is gone. He doesn't want to let go of her hand and take mine."

"Even after all this time?" Nate said.

"It wasn't that long ago."

Then Nate remembered how long painful memories could grip your heart. When he was a kid, seeing a strange car parked in front of his house had scared him for years. He would rush inside to make sure that no one was there to give his mom bad news and make her cry. And all because one day a strange car brought the news that his father was dead. That sense of panic and dread stayed with him for so long. It always seemed like yesterday that the gray car was parked in their driveway, and he walked in to the sounds of his mother sobbing. It wasn't easy to let go of that kind of pain, to set aside bad memories and accept the good things in life.

As Nate was thinking this, Brent put an arm around him and leaned his head on his shoulder. Nate listened to the rushing of the river and to the screams of the children as they chased each other. Putting an arm around Brent, he drew him closer. With his free hand, he cupped Brent's face. Right away, he felt him smile. Brent was definitely one of the good things in life.

After they ate the bacon fritters, the kids got sticks and pretended to fish. Nate had found them a safe spot, and he and Brent watched them carefully. The kids did a lot of yelling. Georgie kept saying that she saw a big fish. Ricky told her that it wasn't a fish, and they argued about it. Nate stood in the shade of a tree and noticed Brent moving behind him. Brent must have felt brave with the kids preoccupied. He pressed himself against Nate's back and slid his hands around his waist.

"We're a good fit," Brent said in his ear. "You feel just right in my arms."

It was true. The corny phrase "made for each other" played in Nate's brain while his body tingled with anticipation. When he whispered, Brent's lips brushed against his ear, and Nate felt little shocks of electricity go through him. He was too keyed up if something like that could get him going. Brent kissed the side of his neck and drew his lips over the edge of his earlobe. The touch of his lips was teasing, but his arms were firm and strong around Nate. Nate ran his hands over them ending at Brent's hands. Brent stopped kissing him as if he was waiting to see if Nate would pull his hands apart and make him let go. But Nate had no intention of doing that, he just wanted more contact. To show him, Nate turned to face him. He enjoyed the sight of the uncertain look on his beautiful face before kissing him lightly. This was no time for anything more than that. A real kiss would have to wait.

The kids were hungry again as they drove in the general direction of home. Just as they were discussing where to go for dinner, they came across a small, fundraising fair in front of a middle school. They couldn't pass that up. Nate decided to pull over even before Georgie started screaming for him to go there.

The fair had bad rides and bad food, but the kids didn't care. Brent spent money like water, and the kids had fun. Anything they wanted was theirs unless Nate said no, which he did when he thought their little stomachs reached a greasy food limit. He didn't want them puking on the rides or on the drive home. They were exhausted and asleep by the time they arrived back at the house. That was a sure sign that they had a good time. Brent had fun too, and Nate hoped he would make a habit of sticking around.

As they drove home, Brent noticed how good Nate looked behind the wheel. As with everything else, the car didn't intimidate him. He impressed Brent so completely without ever trying, just by always being sure of himself. Now the streetlights played over his face, the light gliding over his handsome features. Brent wanted to reach for him, make him pull over. If only the kids weren't sleeping in the back. One of these nights they would have to go out, just the two of them.

Once they got back home, they carried the kids in, trying not to wake them. Nate cradled Georgie while Brent held Ricky. Both of them were still asleep until Brent had to open the door. That's when Ricky stirred. Seeing who was carrying him, Ricky started to squirm.

"Jeez, you were sleeping peacefully a minute ago," Brent said.

Now Ricky jumped out of his arms, and Brent made sure he landed safely. He then walked up the steps decisively next to Brent like that little boy contentedly curled up in Brent's arms a minute ago had

nothing to do with him. After helping Nate get Georgie into her bed without waking her, Brent went to tuck in Ricky.

"Did you have fun?" Brent asked him as he sat on the edge of his bed.

Ricky said a quick and decisive yes.

"Nate is pretty great, huh?"

"He likes to read," Ricky said, and there was no greater compliment than that as far as he was concerned.

After lying quietly but with a frown on his face, Ricky asked, "Does he have a girlfriend?"

"No. And he wouldn't have a girlfriend. He would have a boyfriend," Brent told him. "Why do you ask?"

"Pam had a boyfriend, and she got married and went away."

"Nate doesn't have a boyfriend right now."

"OK." He seemed to be reassured by this.

Brent was glad Ricky liked Nate. He hadn't given it any thought when he hired him. Someone like Nate applying for the nanny job seemed so improbable, Brent just made a grab for him and left the thinking to John. That things worked out so well had to be just dumb luck. Or maybe Nate was right, and Brent had good instincts. He did have three amazing guys working for him, and he hadn't given hiring any of them even two seconds of thought. Thinking back, Brent realized that he had asked Greta to let him adopt Ricky the same way. And at first, he had trusted her to make the right decision, even after she rejected him. In those days, Brent tried to empty his head of thoughts of what would happen when Greta was gone. But as she got worse, he became more determined to make Ricky his son. Partly it was for Georgie's sake. Mainly he was afraid that after Greta was gone, someone with a better claim would come along and take Ricky away from him. Brent couldn't stand to lose him too. Ricky was standoffish and sometimes difficult, but Brent was too attached to him to let him go. He was incredibly relieved when Greta finally agreed to the adoption. He just wished it could have been at a happier time.

While he was lost in thought, Brent saw that Ricky had fallen asleep. He looked kind of funny with his mouth open and the gaps between his teeth showing. Without realizing it, Brent had taken his hand and he still held it. Ricky's hand was small and warm in his. Brent let it go gently so he wouldn't wake him.

Brent wondered where Nate had gone. He was in the loft looking at a photo.

"See. He knows how to smile," Brent said as he saw that Nate held a picture of him and Ricky, who was about two years old at the time. Both of them had big smiles on their faces.

"Ricky looks happy there," Nate noticed.

"That's from out trip to Brussels. We both went with Greta on one of her business trips. Linh, that was Ricky's nanny at that time, couldn't go with us because of some passport issue. Greta was busy so it was just me and Ricky for most of that trip. It was the longest time we ever spent together. We had a blast. He would yell 'Brussels sprouts' any time I asked. Otherwise Ricky was still the same quiet kid we know and love." That trip was part of an idyllic time. They went to some kid friendly museums, visited parks and the zoo. Brent would hold Ricky's hand all the time or carry him when he got tired. He believed they were getting closer. For his part, Brent was becoming seriously attached to this smart, solemn little kid. Greta was already pregnant with Georgie. She seemed to be in perfect health. It wasn't long after that trip that the good times ended.

"Would you rather be somewhere else right now?" Nate asked suddenly.

"What? No," Brent said and wondered why Nate would ask that.

"You just look kind of gloomy and far away," Nate said to explain. "I thought maybe you missed playing with the big boys. It is Saturday night."

"I don't need anyone else as long as I have you," Brent didn't hesitate to say. He was comfortable telling the truth since he didn't expect Nate to believe him. And he sure as hell didn't expect Nate to kiss him. Nate touched the side of his face as his tongue parted Brent's lips. Brent leaned in wanting it deeper. When the kiss ended, he clutched at Nate. He must have looked desperate because Nate told him, "Easy. There's more where that came from. An endless supply actually."

"Do you know what kind of promise you just made me?" Brent asked. He wondered if Nate was saying more than he meant to say. But no. This was Nate. He didn't second-guess himself or blurt things out without thinking. Before going to his room, he gave Brent a confident smile that said that he knew what he wanted. And also that Brent wasn't getting any tonight.

Chapter 10

On Sunday morning, Nate didn't open his eyes right away. He relived the kiss from last night. It was so vivid that it made Nate breathe hard. A kiss had never stayed with him like that. Just a press of his lips against Brent's, the combination of soft and hard, the underlying passion that threatened to burst. His heart pounded in his chest and he was flooded with lust. The kiss suddenly broken, Nate stayed still catching his breath, getting himself under control. He almost felt like someone else had ended it, not him. Nate saw Brent looking at him desperately, like he was asking him something and telling him something at the same time. Nate remembered his promise with a smile.

Nate found Ricky in his room, but Georgie wasn't in hers. Nate enlisted Ricky to help him look for her. They found her in one of the guest rooms, peering into the walk-in closet.

"Don't touch them," Ricky warned her as he ran over.

"I wasn't!" she said defensively.

Nate went in to see what this was about. Georgie showed him dozens of white boxes of different sizes stacked in the closet. They were marked with dates, all of them March 12 but with different years starting with the next.

"They are presents from Mommy," Georgie said.

"They are not presents. They are memory boxes," Ricky corrected her.

"They have presents inside," Georgie insisted.

"Not just presents. They have messages to help us remember," he said to Georgie then turned to Nate to explain. "Like how Mommy called Georgie her baby sunshine because she was always smiling," Ricky explained.

"And what did she call you?" Nate asked.

"Mommy called me peanut."

"Peanut butter," Georgie said.

"No. Peanut," Ricky told her.

"And when you were a baby? Did she call you baby peanut?" Nate asked.

"I don't know. It was a long time ago when I was a baby," Ricky said.

"We can ask Brent." Nate wasn't sure he would know but decided to give it a shot.

It turned out that Brent did know. At breakfast, he told Ricky about it.

"You know how your mom called you peanut."

Ricky nodded.

"When you were really little, she called you itty bitty peanut."

Ricky made an embarrassed face at the nickname, but he also smiled. Brent ruffled his hair.

When they were left alone, Nate told Brent that the kids had shown him the memory boxes.

"They are for the kids to open together on Greta's birthday. When they opened the first one, I got a surprise. I thought it was just for the kids. But then Ricky handed me an envelope with my name on it and there was a bottle of my favorite wine. The envelope had a short note from Greta. I could hear her voice so clearly when I read it. It said 'Drink a glass to me then drink the rest just for fun. If you don't have anyone special to share it with, I hope you soon will.'"

Nate could see how touched he was.

"Were you even old enough to drink?" Nate asked him.

"Almost."

It was strange for Nate to think how young he was then. Nate couldn't imagine being married. At that age, he was in college, which reminded him that he still was and of all the reading he had to do. He left Brent to clean up after breakfast and went to the library.

When Nate took a break and went to get himself something to drink, he found Ricky and Georgie having fun in the kitchen. They were chasing each other around and throwing grapes.

"What are you guys doing? Grapes are for eating," Nate told them.

"This is better," Georgie said.

Ricky had stopped but Georgie was still throwing grapes at him. He ducked most of them. Nate took the bunch of grapes away from her.

"Who is going to pick up all these," Nate asked, seeing all the grapes rolling around on the floor. "You guys, that's who's going to pick them up. Start right now. I want every single grape off the floor."

Ricky did as he was told, but Georgie had a better idea – stomping on the grapes. Nate picked her up as soon as she raised her foot but before she brought it down.

"You want to make an even bigger mess?" Nate said to her.

She nodded.

"You can either pick up the grapes or get a time-out," Nate told her.

"Pick them up. Don't get in trouble," Ricky pleaded with her. He hated to see her get punished. Nate noticed that between them only Ricky worried about that, and he worried about both of them.

Either the threat or the pleading worked, Georgie picked up some grapes but not even close to her fair share.

Ricky followed Nate back to the library. He seemed to like to do his reading in Nate's company. Sometimes he sat at the desk across from

the one Nate used. Georgie didn't get her fill of excitement. She left Nate and Ricky to some quiet time in the library while she went to pester her dad. Nate got some work done before she came back. First she wanted to know if Nate's book had any pictures. He showed her a map or two, and she looked at him indignantly. Seeing that Nate wasn't worth bothering, she went to her brother and demanded a story. Ricky sighed and then started reading. Georgie rolled around on the carpet while Ricky read to her. Sometimes she would ask, "What's happening?" Then Ricky would stop and retell the story as he understood it or misunderstood it.

Nate left them like that and went in search of a book he was sure he packed but couldn't find. Still empty-handed, he came down the stairs to Georgie crying while John held her. Ricky stood nearby, looking confused and guilty.

"But she's not real, honey," John was telling Georgie. His words had no effect.

"What's going on?" Nate asked.

"I came in and heard her crying. Ricky was reading the story of The Little Match Girl and..." John tried to explain, but Georgie's wail interrupted him.

"She died!" Georgie cried.

"But it's OK. She isn't real," John said.

Georgie just kept sobbing. Her eyes dripped with tears.

"Well, that clearly isn't working," Brent said appearing next to them. He took Georgie from John, who said, "Sorry." He handed over Georgie and the tissue he had been using to wipe her nose.

"Why is my girl crying?" Brent asked while Georgie hugged his neck and cried louder.

Seeing Brent holding the crying Georgie, Ricky looked like he was going to cry too then he ran off. Nate followed him to make sure he didn't go far. He tried the library first, but he found Ricky in one of the sitting rooms, curled up in a big armchair with his feet up. Nate decided not to talk to him himself. When he went back to Brent and Georgie, he heard her explaining about the story while Brent consoled her in his own way.

"She was cold."

"Oh, the poor thing," Brent said."

"They didn't help," Georgie said.

"Who didn't?"

"The mean people."

"We'll beat them up," Brent said.

"I hate the mean people. Beat them up, Daddy."

"I can take her," Nate said. "You better go after Ricky. He might think he's in trouble."

"That kid takes himself too seriously," Brent said as he passed Georgie to Nate.

"Maybe I should go," Nate said not sure if Brent was the one to handle it after all.

"No. I got it," Brent said and gave him a confident look.

Brent stopped in the doorway and watched his little boy brooding in that big armchair. It was typical of Georgie to get upset over a sad story. And it was typical of Ricky to blame himself when she got upset. Going in, Brent kneeled in front of him.

"It's not your fault. That story is just too sad for Georgie. You didn't do anything wrong. She just doesn't know the difference between real and made up people," Brent told him while holding his hand.

Ricky halfheartedly pulled his hand away and said, "Go and make Georgie stop crying. I don't need you."

"Yes, you do. I may not be a good dad, but I am your dad and Georgie's."

Ricky looked at him like he wanted to believe his words.

"Let's go back together and see how Georgie is doing," Brent said and took his hand again.

From the hallway, they could hear that Nate was taking a different approach to consoling Georgie.

"That story can teach everyone to be nice to people and help them, not to be mean," Nate said to her, but she had already found a solution she liked.

"I hate the mean people. Daddy will beat them up." Georgie looked around for her dad. "Where's Daddy?"

"He's with Ricky. Ricky is sad too."

That's when Georgie spotted Brent and Ricky coming to join them.

"Ricky! Don't be sad," Georgie said and reached down to hug him. Nate had to set her down. She gave Ricky a big hug, which he didn't return. But Georgie didn't mind. She just kept hugging him roughly until they both fell down and started wrestling.

Later, Nate was doing more work in the library. When Ricky came in to look for one of his toys, Nate took the opportunity to talk to him. He sat with him on the couch as Ricky clutched an action figure in his hand.

"I have a tip for you. When you're telling Georgie a story or reading to her, watch her face. If it looks like she's getting upset or too scared, change the story," Nate told him.

"But how can I?" Ricky asked.

"Give it a happy ending."

"I don't know how," Ricky protested.

"Just say 'And they lived happily ever after.'"
"Even the Little Match Girl?" Ricky asked.
"Even her," Nate confirmed. "She lived happily ever after."
Ricky looked doubtful, but Nate hoped for the best.

That evening, Quin and John invited them all over for dinner at the guesthouse. After the meal, everyone came back to the main house, and Quin announced the plan for the night.

"After the shrimp are in bed, we're going to be having a little adult, after hours fun."

"How adult?" Nate asked.

"How adult were you hoping for?" Brent said with one of his lascivious looks.

They were in a sitting room with a bar in the corner. Two sofas faced each other over a metal coffee table. For a while they sat around with the kids. Brent and Quin set up the booze for later and argued about it. Knowing that good times were ahead, the kids weren't easy to persuade that it was their bedtime. Nate picked up Georgie and called Ricky over.

"Oh, come on. Let my babies stay up," Brent pleaded with Nate, undermining the plan for an adults only evening.

"Don't drink and drive!" Georgie yelled over Nate's shoulder as he carried her away.

It took more effort than usual to get the kids to lie down. Even Ricky gave him trouble. Expecting them to sneak downstairs if they got a chance, Nate stayed with them until they were asleep.

When he got back to the guys, he heard Brent say, "And you know, it wouldn't kill any of you to walk around here shirtless sometimes."

"We're discussing Brent's hiring methods," Quin said to explain Brent's outburst.

Seeing them together it was obvious that they didn't just work for Brent. They cared for him. They were his friends.

"Brent hires with his dick. What's there to discuss?" John grumbled.

Since they all had drinks in hand, Nate got himself some orange juice and seltzer.

"You don't want a real drink?" Brent asked. "Quin gets paid to be the designated driver. And also, you live right upstairs."

"No. This is fine," Nate said and took a seat next to Brent.

"See how responsible he is," Brent told John. "And did you see how well he handled the kids while I was sabotaging him?"

"Don't pretend you hired him for the kids," John said.

"I'm surprised you restrained yourself and stopped at one," Nate said. "I would expect you to have a nanny for each child."

"We tried that when Greta was sick and Georgie needed so much attention. But Pam couldn't get along with the other nanny. You nannies are a jealous bunch," Brent said.

John shook his head.

"What?" Brent asked.

"Don't pretend you don't know the real story," John said to him. He wasn't letting him get away with anything. "Pam told us what really happened with Belinda."

Nate looked around at all of them in confusion so Quin filled him in.

"That other nanny had a big mouth and a nasty mind," Quin said for Nate's benefit. "Pam said that this Belinda was talking shit about Brent, sometimes right in front of Ricky. Pam wasn't having that."

"What was she saying?" Nate wanted to know.

John took it from there.

"According to Pam, Belinda would say, 'He's not this one's father, only the baby's.' And also that she wished she was the baby's nanny because Brent didn't care about Ricky at all. 'As soon as that woman is in the ground, he'll send Ricky to some boarding school, and I'll be out of a job.'"

"Ricky heard that?" Nate was appalled.

"I'm not sure about all of it," John said.

"That's why Pam had to get rid of her," Quin explained. "Pam was as mean to her as she knew how to be, and she made that girl quit."

"I wish she had told me when it happened," Brent said. "I only found out later."

"You were stressed. Greta was going through so much. Pam decided to just handle it her own way," Quin told him. He obviously approved of her initiative.

"Pam was so chummy with you guys," Brent said. Then he claimed, "You three were always ganging up on me." He turned to Nate and put an arm around him. "You're on my side, right?"

While Brent was getting friendly with Nate, John was looking more relaxed than usual as he leaned into Quin. The sight of John and Quin inspired Brent to talk about other couples he knew and how often they cheated on each other. John called him a liar at every turn, but Quin egged him on. Nate got quizzed about his exes. He made sure to talk them up so Brent would be jealous.

"You aren't by any chance adding an inch here and there?" Quin accused him.

"I've dated some above average guys," Nate claimed.

"Bring them on," Brent challenged him.

John looked up at Quin and asked, "Are we the evil stepsisters?"

"Oh, man," is all Quin said in response to this non sequitur.

John elaborated.

"Brent is a sleeping prince and only the right man can wake him." John pointed his empty glass first at Brent and then at Nate.

"Baby, you sure get drunk fast," Quin said as he cradled him.

"I'm not drunk. I'm comfortable." John did look comfortable sprawled in Quin's strong embrace.

"Let's see how comfortable you are. Do you like Brent?" Quin asked him.

"Of course I do." John even smiled at Brent to prove it.

"You're real comfortable, alright," Quin said smugly.

"People don't have to be impaired to like me. I'm not a breathalyzer," Brent told him.

"Look at him. He's like a big helpless baby," John said and gazed at Brent with a goofy, pitying look.

"Hey!" Brent objected. "Let's keep this complimentary. Go back to that prince charming thing you were saying."

John corrected him.

"You aren't prince charming. He's prince charming." He pointed to Nate.

"That's good. Tell me more," Brent said, but John was preoccupied with Quin now. He stroked his face and smiled at him.

"You're so beautiful, and I'm so happy. It's like my other life never even existed," John told Quin.

Nate was going to ask what he meant, but Quin shook his head to stop him. Looking over at Brent, Nate saw that he either knew all about it, or knew not to ask.

"Look at him acting all modest," John said. He was talking about Brent.

"I don't even know what that word means," Brent told him, but his expression revealed that he knew plenty.

John got up and came over after bumping into the coffee table. He leaned down and put his arms around Brent's neck and kissed him on the cheek. When he went back to Quin, he gave him a completely different kind of kiss. He was making out with Quin pretty seriously so Quin decided to take him home.

"Is he going to be embarrassed about that tomorrow?" Nate asked Brent after they walked them to the door.

"No. He'll pretend it never happened," Brent said, chagrined.

"And if I remind him?"

"He'll still pretend it never happened."

Nate guessed that Brent had tried and failed to get some mileage out of that kind of thing before.

Brent and Nate went upstairs and looked in on the kids. When they came out into the hallway, Brent put an arm over Nate's shoulder and led him to his bedroom. Looking at Brent's big bed, Nate wondered what Brent had in mind.

"I was hoping to get you drunk and take advantage of you," Brent

said seeing his look.

Nate contradicted him immediately.

"No, you weren't. You want me fully aware and remembering every moment." Then Nate got more serious. "I'm cautious about drinking. My dad had a drinking problem."

"I'm sorry," Brent said.

Nate got on the bed. Brent climbed on too and leaned against the headboard next to him so he could listen to Nate tell him about his dad.

"He was a nice guy even when he was drunk. I think that's why my mom stayed with him for so long. But then one day he drove me home from a friend's house after he'd had a few. Nothing happened, but Mom was horrified. That was the end. She asked Dad to move out until he stopped drinking."

Brent took his hand, and Nate decided to keep talking.

"I felt so guilty. For a long time I thought that I had gotten my dad in trouble, that he had to leave because of me. My mom tried to tell me it wasn't my fault. It was even harder after he was killed. He died during a hold up at a liquor store, just an innocent bystander. I overheard my mom say one time, 'I was always afraid that his drinking would kill him. And I guess it did.' That was a terrible time. My mom still loved my dad. She was so sad. I was inconsolable. But we got through it together," Nate said and turned to give Brent a smile.

"It's good that you had each other."

That reminded Nate that Brent had been alone when he lost both his parents. It also made him think about Ricky and what John and Quin said about that other nanny. It was one more thing to add to his theories about Brent and Ricky. Since he had arrived, Nate had wondered why Ricky was so resistant to being Brent's son. He thought that maybe Ricky was jealous of the new man in his mother's life, or maybe he sensed that the relationship between Brent and Greta wasn't the real thing. Nate thought that it might even be Brent himself. If Brent felt guilty, that might be why he let Ricky get away with things. But then he let Georgie get away with even more. Instead of guessing, Nate decided to ask about it.

"When you found out about what that nanny said, did you talk to Ricky about it?" Nate asked.

As always, Brent was ready to share.

"I tried to reassure him about that stuff. I don't even know how much he heard. Anyway, I don't think the real problem is anything some nanny said. His mother died after a long and painful illness. I think that overshadowed everything else. Greta was sick for a long time. She had breast cancer, and it metastasized to her bones. So

many treatments. She fought so hard. And she didn't always take enough pain medication. Sometimes she was in so much pain, I wanted to cry for her. But I never let myself cry while she was alive. She was determined to fight and to keep her head clear for the kids as much as she could. When the pain was too much for her, I would have to play the bad guy and keep them away. Georgie didn't know what was happening, but Ricky just wanted to be with his mom. And with so little time left, I was always taking him away from her."

"What about Pam? Didn't she have to do that too?" Nate asked since Ricky was so fond of her.

"She did. But mainly she was busy with Georgie. Georgie was still so little. That's why we hired that other nanny for Ricky."

"And she did more harm than good." Nate said.

"I think Ricky can see the truth for himself. He'll open his heart when he's ready."

Nate frowned at him, but Brent only gave him a disarming smile. He seemed sure about this, like he could see the future clearly. And Nate could see it too. Ricky had a good heart. He just had to listen to what it was telling him.

In Nate's mind, thoughts of his own childhood mixed together with everything Brent said. Pain and happiness lived together in everyone's heart. Since coming to this house, Nate had been reminded of his own pain, but he had also been happier than he ever remembered being. Nate didn't expect to feel so much a part of things. When he first met Brent, he saw him as a gorgeous guy who just happened to be likable as well as pushy. Now he was so real, very imperfect, and more desirable than ever.

For a while they just sat together. Brent's hand lazily rubbed the back of Nate's neck. Brent had a wonderful touch. Nate was getting addicted to it. Thinking about the massage Brent had given him, he smiled. As Brent kissed his smiling face, Nate shifted closer to him and slipped an arm around his waist. They turned to each other, but they didn't move. Holding one another, they gazed into each other's eyes. They moved as one and their mouths came together for a kiss.

Before he knew it, Nate was kissing Brent deeper, sliding his hand under his clothes to feel him. He wanted him so much, and tonight he was going to be with him. Nate had made a leap before he made the decision to jump. Really the decision was made as soon as he laid eyes on Brent. Now their mouths moved over each other with a fierce, disorganized passion. They slowed, but that seemed only to make the kiss hotter, more deliberate and meaningful. Nate felt like it seared right through him. He didn't want it to stop, but Brent moaned and then gasped.

"You need to breathe," Nate told him a little annoyed that the kiss ended.

"Forgot," Brent said then smiled. He moved closer and pressed his lips to Nate's again. Their mouths opened and melded into one. Then Brent was struggling again. This time, Nate stopped.

"Did you forget to breathe again?"

"Breathing, who needs it?" Brent claimed going back for more.

Nate's hands found their way up underneath Brent's shirt and down the back of his jeans and boxers to his ass. Brent ground into him hard and moaned. Nate's finger slid down the crevice and teased his hole while his tongue plunged deep into Brent's mouth. Brent's uncoordinated hands were grasping at Nate's belt, opening the buttons of his fly groping through his boxers to his cock. Brent was shaking with need. Nate pushed him down on the bed. He unzipped him and they both dragged his jeans down hurriedly. Nate buried his face in the front of his boxers before he pulled them down his legs. He wanted his scent before the rest of him. Nate kissed the inside of his thigh until his mouth reached Brent's cock. Brent's erection was as beautiful as the rest of him. As Brent moaned, Nate let his tongue play over his cock, his balls and the coarse, golden hair. Leaving a trail of kisses along the shaft, he finally let the head of his cock enter his mouth. Brent's moans grew louder.

"Keep it down," Nate warned him.

"It's your fault," Brent said then he had to suppress another moan as Nate's mouth enveloped him again.

Nate went slow, wanting to enjoy him as long as he could. With every movement, pleasure passed back and forth between them. Brent shook as it took him in waves until it grew so powerful it carried him over the edge. When he came, Nate was ready for him. He let Brent's come pour down his throat, moaning as he received it.

As soon as he was able to speak, Brent said, "Fuck me."

Nate was sprawled over him, kissing his thigh. Turning over, he lay next to Brent. The whole time, Brent followed his rock hard cock with his eyes as if mesmerized by it.

"Not tonight. We're working up to that," Nate said. He stroked his erection lightly and groaned deep in his throat.

"You mean you're making me suffer," Brent said as he ran his hand over Nate's chest.

Nate guided his hand to his erection and squeezed Brent's hand over it.

"Are you sure you don't want to...?" Brent asked.

Nate only nodded. Brent groaned then leaned down. He kissed the head of Nate's cock.

"God, I want it inside me," Brent said before he took it in his mouth.

He swirled his tongue over the head making Nate arch his back and grunt.

"This is good too," Brent said. He licked his lips and smiled up at Nate. "I know I'm greedy." He proved it by taking Nate's cock deep. Nate rolled his head in response, his eyes closed, a loud yell this close to escaping his lips. He wished he didn't have to hold back, that he could show Brent in every way how good he made him feel. To make up for his silence, Nate stroked Brent's hair and down the back of his neck then over his broad shoulders. Brent's movements under his hand were an added pleasure to him. He could tell Brent wasn't sparing himself. He gave Nate his all. His sucking became unbearable. His moans were like an electric current over Nate's raw, aching flesh. A shock of pure pleasure surged through him and he came, calling Brent's name in a husky voice. Clutching at him while looking up into his eyes, Brent sucked him dry.

Chapter 12

Waking up Monday morning, Nate felt like he was swimming through a dream. The sensations that flooded him were so good, they seemed unreal. The pleasure Brent gave him last night was overwhelming. It was still with him like it had some lasting power. So that's what it felt like when someone reached your heart. He wanted to ask Brent if it was like that for him, but he wasn't there. Nate had moved to his own room. It had been painful to leave Brent's bed. Nate had the urge to go there now, surprise Brent, wake him with a blowjob. But Nate's workday was starting.

From the window in the kitchen, Nate saw that John was coming in with some files and decided to ambush him. He joined him in the office, but it looked like he was going to leave again.

"I thought I had you cornered," Nate said.

"I'm not staying. I need to get some work done," he pointed toward the guesthouse.

"I thought this was your office," Nate said.

"Sometimes. My other office is over there. It's hard to get any real work done in this zoo. I don't know who is the bigger disruption, the kids or Brent."

There was no proof of that right now. The house was pretty quiet. Quin had taken the kids to school, and Brent was probably still sleeping.

"I kind of like this zoo," Nate said with a smile. "I haven't been bored for one second." He tried not to think about last night too much. Brent's beautiful eyes were impossible to block out though.

"Then you're the right man for the job," John told him.

Nate thought so too. Since he would need to go to Miss Pullman's soon, he got to the point.

"You said something last night about your previous life. Quin made sure I didn't ask you about it."

"And here you are, asking," John said wryly.

"You gave Brent credit for something. And if it's about Brent, I want to know about it," Nate admitted. If he wanted John to tell him personal things, the least he could do was be honest with him.

"What is it with you two?" John said as he shook his head.

"What? You don't think I'm good enough for Brent?" Nate asked jokingly.

"You're fine," John said with a wave of his hand, making sure not to stroke his ego too hard. "But I get paid to worry about things."

"You don't worry about Brent because he pays you." Nate hadn't known either one of them long, but he was sure of that.

"You could say I owe him. I had a crappy childhood and was on my way to continuing a losing streak into a crappy adulthood when Brent came along," John said. Apparently he had decided to tell Nate about himself.

"You had it rough?"

"Just too many foster homes, some bad, some OK, but none of them real homes. And I didn't do much better on my own. Then I fell in with this guy. After all those foster homes, I was desperate to belong. Too desperate. Let's say it wasn't a good relationship. But I was stuck. I was miserable, but I didn't know how to get out. Gary was a stock broker. Smart, impressive, mean. I was living with him. I was working for him as well. That's how I met Brent, and he stole me away."

"He stole you?" Nate asked with a laugh.

John smiled then frowned as he told Nate about meeting Brent.

"I was ready to dismiss him. Some rich boy that Gary was going to make even richer. But Brent kept looking at me like he really saw me. When he got me alone, he offered me a job here. He said he needed me. I just figured he was hitting on me. But there was a look in his eyes like he understood what I was going through. It was like a lifeline, but I didn't take it right away. He kept showing up, bugging me, telling me about this place. He wouldn't give up till I was out of there and moved in here." John couldn't hide how much Brent's persistence meant to him.

"And you found where you belong?" Nate asked. It certainly seemed that way to him.

"This crazy place." John looked shy as he said it. It was like his own happiness embarrassed him. No wonder he was always so grouchy. He was hiding how happy he was. Now he looked around.

"The first time I stood in this office, I was listening to the kids arguing and Pam trying to get them to behave. I saw Brent looking at me like I was the one who had saved him not the other way around."

"He did tell you he needed you," Nate pointed out.

"He needs someone," John said and looked at Nate significantly.

"Don't tell me you're giving us your blessing," Nate told him.

John looked at him the way he usually looked at Brent.

As they walked out of the office, Nate asked him about Quin.

"Where does Quin go all the time?" Nate had noticed that he was away a lot.

"He has his own thing. Not being on duty every minute is one of the perks of being a driver. He's getting his private investigator's license and taking martial arts classes."

"That is so hot," Nate had to admit.

"Hey, I'm standing right here," Brent said. He had been lurking by the stairs. Nate was surprised he was up.

"And?" John challenged him.

"I think it's hot too. Now say something nice about me," he said, turning to Nate.

"I said it all last night," Nate told him.

"You better not mean that. I want a lot more of what I got last night," Brent said.

"I might have a few more things to say," Nate said with an indulgent smile since Brent had been so good.

John pretended to be disgusted, grumbled and left.

Brent immediately rushed at Nate. Regrettably, Nate had to stop him before he started making out with him in earnest.

"In five minutes, I'm out the door," Nate warned him.

"Why were you wasting time with John instead of wasting time with me?" Brent complained.

"I was getting his life's story. He told me you stole him from some jerk."

"I should thank that jerk. I would have never found John if it wasn't for him. I needed him. Greta's assistant had higher ambitions than working for someone like me. I didn't know what I was going to do," Brent said, minimizing what he did for John.

"John tells a different story," Nate said.

"He was unhappy, and I just made him a better offer, that's all. Then I made it again and again until John accepted, dumped that guy and came here."

"To live happily ever after. But he didn't fall madly in love with you?" Nate said. He really did wonder why everyone wasn't crazy about Brent.

"I know. How is that even possible?"

"To each his own," Nate said and got dangerously close to Brent.

"Is that how it works? There's someone for everyone?" Brent asked as he kissed his face and ran his hands down his back.

"Yes. You just keep hiring random guys until you click with one of them."

"I guess I can take down the help wanted sign now," Brent said and buried his face in the crook of his neck.

As Brent fondled his ass and kissed his neck, Nate hated to stop him. They kissed for a while at the door until Nate wrenched himself away.

Brent stood at the door even after Nate was gone. He finally noticed the chill of the morning air and went inside. This was the way he felt when Nate left his bed last night too. Brent's arm was still stretched out across the bed, still reaching for Nate to stop him from leaving. He stayed awake humming with aftershocks. Even hours later his whole body was infused with a wonderful feeling. He and Nate were so good

together. Brent had even forgotten that he wanted to make a good first impression. He let desire take him. He got carried away by his lust, and it still worked out. It was like there was no wrong move. Whatever he did, Nate knew how to respond. Just as he always knew what to say. He was like no one else. Nate's eyes didn't ask for anything and that made Brent want to offer him everything.

Even after they made each other come, Brent felt such a strong yearning for Nate. And he knew why being with Nate didn't calm his need. He didn't just want Nate's body. Though he didn't want to face it, he knew what it was. Lust can be satisfied, at least for a while. Love was bottomless, impossible to satisfy. It was also new to Brent. He was unprepared for it so it swallowed him whole, drew him to Nate, made him want to confess to him, claim him, make him his. What a crazy feeling. Brent laughed at himself. He wondered if it was possible that Nate could feel the same way. Just the thought that he didn't was crushingly painful. Brent was afraid, but he wanted to believe that this thing between them was real. Maybe his answer was Nate himself. He was the most real person he had ever known. That's what had struck him when they first met. Nate's eyes didn't waver. His hand was strong and warm, a hand you never want to let go. Right away Brent had recognized him as the man he needed. Now he was more than that. Nate was now in his heart and in his dreams for the future.

Chapter 13

Nate had been back for a little while. As Ricky did his homework at the kitchen table, Nate went over his notes from his latest bout of reading. He felt like his brain couldn't keep up with everything he was trying to cram in there before he lost access to Professor Pullman's library. Meanwhile, Georgie was playing the teacher to both him and Ricky. This meant that she pointed to each one of them with Ricky's small, plastic ruler and yelled, "F! F!"

"What do I get?" Brent asked her as he came in.

She ran to him with a hug and a kiss but still gave him an F.

"Is it OK if I take Ricky and Georgie to visit Miss Pullman?" Nate asked Brent. Miss Pullman had invited the kids for a visit.

"What about me?" Brent asked.

"I don't understand your question," Nate said since Brent couldn't possibly mean that he wanted to visit an old lady.

"Why aren't I invited?"

"Would you like to go?" Nate was sure Miss Pullman wouldn't mind.

"No." Seeing Nate's disapproving look, he explained, "I just don't want to be overlooked."

"That would be impossible," Nate told him. He couldn't see how anyone with eyes could overlook him.

Nate got the kids ready while Brent pouted that he was being left behind. When Nate repeated his invitation, Brent refused again. Ricky gave Nate a commiserating look.

As they walked up the path to the Pullman house, Nate had to keep Georgie from picking the flowers from the flowerbeds along the way.

"Those aren't the kinds of flowers you pick," Ricky told her. She was used to picking whatever flowers she liked at home.

"So these are the little hellions," Miss Pullman said as soon as she opened the door.

"Georgie mostly," Nate told her. He made sure to hold on to Georgie so she wouldn't live up to her reputation.

"I like your shirt," Georgie said to Miss Pullman, who always dressed in oversized, garish shirts and bright leggings. The outfits accentuated her thick torso and skinny legs.

"Why, thank you, darling. It's one of my favorites," she said to Georgie and complimented her taste. Nate hoped she would outgrow it.

Miss Pullman had cookies ready that had clearly come straight out of a box, not that anyone was complaining. She also had two glasses of milk and a bottle of chocolate syrup set up so the kids could make it how they liked. Georgie wanted to put more chocolate syrup than

would fit in the glass. Even with Nate restraining them, they still made a mess dunking the cookies. After that, they explored the house, and Miss Pullman showed them souvenirs from her trips. Ricky liked hearing about every place she went and every cruise she took. Georgie just wanted to play with the tchotchkes. They settled in the game room, which was decorated with the framed puzzles Miss Pullman had solved. That's where she hosted booze fueled bridge sessions. Seeing the playing cards, the kids started playing with them. Ricky was trying to explain the rules, but Georgie just kept throwing down cards and yelling, "Checkmate!"

"They are so different," Miss Pullman whispered though the kids were out of earshot. "It's hard to believe they're even half related."

Nate looked at them and thought the opposite. They looked exactly like brother and sister. They certainly fought like brother and sister.

"Appearances can be deceiving," he said to Miss Pullman absently and thought about Brent. He was a perfect example of that.

Last night had thrown Nate off balance. He was more preoccupied with him than ever before. He almost felt like it might have been a mistake, but it was also something he couldn't deny himself. It was supposed to cool him off a little, but it only served as that taste that makes you hungry for more.

Miss Pullman had fun hosting the children, and they behaved well enough, but Nate didn't want to push their luck. He took them home before anything got broken.

"Maybe I'll go somewhere, and I won't invite you," Brent grumbled when they got back. He was lounging in the sunroom which was ruddy with the beginnings of a sunset. Nate admired how Brent looked in that light.

"You do that all the time," Nate reminded him.

"Did. Want to come clubbing with me?" Brent asked, but Nate wasn't sure he meant it.

"Won't I be in the way when you're trying to pick up guys?"

"If you scare them off, you'll just have to make it up to me," Brent said. He jumped up and threw an arm over Nate's shoulder then kissed him.

Brent was thrilled that he and Nate were going out and also a little nervous. The kids were in bed and already asleep, and Quin and John were going to watch them.

"Looks like it's on. This is getting serious," Quin said coming up behind Brent as he stood in front of a hallway mirror to make sure he looked good enough for Nate. He never had trouble getting any guy he set his sights on, but he had never wanted anyone in this way.

"No, it's not," Brent said defensively and squirmed just as Quin intended.

"Who are you lying to?" Quin looked around like he was looking for someone gullible enough to buy Brent's BS.

"Mostly me," Brent said. It was hard to admit what was happening. He was afraid to take a deep breath, afraid that he would break whatever magic was making this happen.

"Just relax and go with it," Quin advised and clapped him on the back.

"Like you did?" Brent said in an accusing way, but Quin admitted it without hesitation.

"Damn right. When one of these ballsy nerds gets his hooks into you, there's no use fighting it. Just lie back and enjoy the ride."

"Is that how it works?" Brent asked. He wondered if it could really be that easy. "I just don't know if I want the pressure of chasing down a boyfriend." Brent had never had one and wasn't sure how he would handle himself. Mostly, he didn't know how to make him stay.

"Then you shouldn't have hired one," Quin told him.

"I hired him as a manny and a sex toy."

"You hire everyone as a sex toy," Quin said.

"And it never works out," Brent complained.

"It does work out. It worked out better than you planned." Quin smiled leaving no doubt what he meant.

"Like you and John, you mean."

"Your best work," Quin said, looking self-satisfied.

"You know you two make me sick."

"Shut up. You love us."

Brent was going to deny that, but when Nate came out of his room, he wiped all thoughts from his head. He wore a tight, black T-shirt that Brent wanted to peel off him before licking every inch of him. His jeans and what was under them would get the same treatment. But when Brent suggested they skip the club and cut to the main course, Nate just marched past him to the garage to pick out a car.

Nate decided that a Lamborghini was the right car for going clubbing. It seemed both extravagant and obnoxious to show up driving something like that, but Brent was the more ostentatious accessory as far as Nate was concerned.

Though more upscale than the clubs Nate had gone to, Shonen had the spirit he recognized as soon as he walked through the doors. It was a hunger, a yearning, which seemed more hopeful and promising to Nate with Brent by his side. Dense with bodies, pulsing with light, the place was alive and loud enough to knock you over, and Brent was leading them into the thick of it. Guys were shouting to get their drink

orders heard. Sweat slick muscles were on display all around. The beat was like the giant heart of a crowd of men with only one thing on their minds – other men.

Nate had only one man on his mind, and he was radiant. The life in this place suffused Brent. Nate never spent much time in clubs and bars unless his friends dragged him there. When he went, he preferred hanging out with people he knew, not meeting strangers. Being here with Brent was something new. He felt the thrill of it, but he felt grounded too, anchored and flying free.

With a drink each, they went to a less crowded spot and surveyed the multitudes. Their eyes lingered on some choice guys then moved on.

"You see anything you like better?" Brent asked, shouting in his ear.

"Better?"

"Better than what's right in front of you."

Nate smiled at him. The answer was no, not even close.

They danced, their bodies pressed together tightly. They were grinding against one another with a delicious friction that drove Nate insane with lust. Everyone around them was just a blur, and Brent was as bright and burning as the sun.

Brent had watched Nate's face when they entered. He saw him smile as the lights played over his face. He then turned to Brent to give him a look that he read as some kind of promise.

Being here with Nate, Brent again felt like he was a part of things but not like ever before. This was a new feeling, more exhilarating, more real. He was now one of those guys who came in to show off their boyfriends while giving everyone a warning look to keep their hands off. Having someone to share the experience brought the place to new life. It was like being with Nate united him with everyone who was like them, whether they had someone or were still looking. And when he left, Brent would get to go home with Nate, like he was the one he had come here to find. Really, until now, Brent had only come to escape.

After absorbing the noise and the motion, he and Nate moved toward the bar. They barely made their way through. Brent was worried that they might get separated, but the other muscled bodies only pushed him harder against Nate, which was where he wanted to be. When Brent smirked at him, Nate smirked right back and put his arms around him.

"Might as well," Nate said directly in his ear so he could be heard.

Brent loved the closeness of it, feeling Nate's breath on his neck. He didn't care that the place was filled with noise and people as long as he could lose himself in Nate's eyes. Nothing and no one could distract

him from Nate. He was heaven.

As they drove away, Nate was completely sober, and Brent was a little bit buzzed. He ran his hand over Nate's thigh as a suggestion of what they might do next.

"That's one, by the way," Nate said cryptically.

"One what?"

"Date. Bringing you closer to the two date minimum for getting properly laid," Nate explained.

"This is not a date. I can throw a better date than this," Brent boasted. "We're just two guys out here looking for a good time."

"I've been on a few dates so I know a date when I'm on one," Nate insisted.

Brent smiled. He was guilty as charged.

As he drove, Nate looked around, and Brent hoped he was looking for a place to stop. He hit the brakes then backed up, pulling into a parking lot of an auction house. Brent was puzzled by his choice. Maybe Nate wanted some parking lot action, fog up the windows and watch out for the stick shift, that kind of thing. He was surprised when Nate got out of the car. He led the way to the side of the building along a giant, perfectly trimmed hedge. This was the building's blind side, no windows or doors. It was very close to the hedge, just room enough for one person. As they went through, Brent didn't ask any questions. Nate looked back and smiled at him. Then he disappeared. Brent saw that he had ducked into an alcove just big enough for two.

"How did you know this was here?" Brent asked as Nate pulled him close and started kissing his throat.

"I didn't, but it looked promising," Nate said as he threw his arms around his neck. In the darkness, Brent could still see him so clearly. He drew him in for a kiss. Their mouths opened. Lips and tongues slid and wrestled as they moaned. Almost clawing his hands down Nate's back, Brent gripped his ass and brought him closer. They ground into each other roughly, not getting enough contact through their jeans. They fumbled with each other's zippers then their own. They freed their cocks, already hard, and groped for each other. Their deep moans mixed, maybe too loudly. Nate said, "Shhh." But he couldn't stay quiet for long either with Brent stroking him. They were caught in the same trap, at the mercy of their feelings for each other, and they didn't want to escape. They wanted to stay locked in each other's arms, each a willing prisoner of the other.

Brent wanted to rip that t-shirt off Nate and then the pants, but they might need to put on their clothes fast so he couldn't. He was desperate to get his hands on Nate's flesh again, to feel it respond to

his touch.

"I could lick you from head to toe then do it all over again and again till there was nothing left of you but your belt buckle," he whispered to Nate.

"You do know that a come-on shouldn't sound like a death threat," Nate told him as he kneeled. Brent wanted to protest. He wanted to suck him off first. It was no use. Nate pushed him so he was leaning on the wall. Brent anchored himself against it. Under the influence of his need, he felt like he could push back hard enough to bring the whole place crashing down. And then Nate's mouth was on him, and he choked back a loud moan that threatened to tear through the night. He clawed at the wall like he wanted to escape, but he only wanted more.

"Oh, God, Nate, please," he gasped and begged. He wanted release, but he never wanted this to end. If only Nate could suck him and his tongue could lap at him forever. His orgasm was a shock that slammed him back. A guttural noise escaped him. He felt along Nate's throat so he could feel him swallow.

"Oh, Nate. Oh, Nate," he said lovingly.

He meant to kneel, but he just collapsed on top of Nate. Brent had to kiss him to try and find some relief from the intensity of his feelings. He wanted to drown in Nate, to possess him and be possessed by him. Nate's tongue probed as Brent sucked on it, the taste salty, new and familiar.

Not able to wait any more, Brent made him stand up. Nate's cock was so hard, Brent had to have it. His mouth tightened around it. Brent sucked him hard, not hungry, starving. As his head pistoned, he felt Nate's hands on him, gentle but urging him on. He murmured encouragements and curses. He rocked his hips in rhythm with Brent. Nate said, "Now" and came, flooding his mouth. Brent was greedy and took it all, coming with his hand on his own dick as he swallowed. Triumphant and spent, he looked up at Nate like he was declaring his love.

When they got back home, they found Quin and John asleep on the sofa in the loft. John was resting his head on Quin's broad chest. It was a beautiful sight even with one side of John's face smushed against Quin.

Seeing Nate looking enviously at John and Quin as they slept, Brent said, "We can do that too."

"What? Take a nap together?" Nate joked, but looking into his eyes Brent could see that he had something more serious on his mind as well.

Brent had wanted to tell him, "We can be together too, really

together." He just couldn't get the words out. Still, he could swear that Nate understood him, maybe even agreed. But Brent knew for something to really happen, he had to come out and say it.

When Nate got home from his second job, the kids weren't there yet. Ricky had soccer practice, and Quin took Georgie over there to watch and cheer. It turned out that Brent wasn't home either. Nate got some extra work done in the quiet house until the kids got home. When he heard the car, he went to the front door to meet them.

"Hey!" Nate said in surprise. He saw that Ricky looked disheveled and a little bit scratched up as he got out of the car.

Since Ricky walked to the library without a word, Nate turned to Quin.

"There might be a phone call to go with that," Quin told him as he came in carrying Georgie.

"Ricky was fighting!" Georgie said excitedly. Quin was probably holding her because she wouldn't leave Ricky alone otherwise.

"A phone call from the school or from the kid's parents?" Nate asked.

"Who knows. But the boys only wrestled a little. It was no big deal. Nothing to be tripping over." As Quin talked, Georgie talked over him.

"Quin picked them up like this," she demonstrated holding out both her hands. "And he yelled with his big voice. They were scared." Georgie laughed.

"What started it?" Nate asked Quin while trying to shush Georgie. He had never seen Ricky really lose his temper.

"Boys fight," Quin said with a shrug.

"Even Ricky?" Nate was surprised that anyone could set him off if Georgie couldn't.

"Ricky might not fight as much as some." The sly smile on Quin's face and the gleam in his eyes told Nate that he knew a lot about boys fighting.

"You mean you?"

"I was a little scrapper. After I built myself up, I got to like it, to tell you the truth. All that physical contact."

"Now you're making this dirty," Nate said and covered Georgie's ears.

Quin did not look apologetic. He did take Georgie into the kitchen to distract her with snacks and keep her out of the way.

Nate went to the library and sat across from Ricky on the floor. He checked him over to make sure he wasn't really hurt. Ricky looked down, like he did whenever he thought he was in trouble.

"Does anything hurt?" Nate asked him.

Ricky barely shook his head. Nate decided to count that as an answer.

"Now you're going to tell me why you were fighting. Start with the other boy's name," Nate said in a voice that didn't allow for any argument.

"Nelson."

"His full name."

"Nelson Hackford." Ricky said the name with an angry look.

"Now tell me what started the fight."

"Nelson said Brent was a cocksucker."

"OK. Don't say that word. Not until you're eighteen. Or twenty-five. Or an old man," Nate told him.

Ricky looked confused. He probably didn't know what it meant or hopefully didn't know what it meant. Nate continued his interrogation.

"And did you try to hurt him because of what he said?"

"I hit him. But I couldn't hit him again because we were rolling around on the grass. I don't let anybody say mean things about Brent because he's Georgie's dad," Ricky said fiercely. His angry voice and look as much as proved that Georgie wasn't his only reason.

"And your dad too," Nate reminded him.

Ricky didn't deny it. He stayed silent on the subject but looked grim and determined when it came to defending Brent's good name. He was a funny little guy.

Nate lectured him about an appropriate response to a verbal insult.

"When someone throws words at you, you don't throw punches. You throw words back at them. Don't hit anyone who isn't trying to hit you."

Ricky frowned so Nate gave him some more concrete advice.

"If someone says mean things about Brent, you can say mean things about their dad or their mom."

Ricky looked like he understood now. But he looked worried again when Nate told him he would have to tell Brent what happened.

When Brent came home, Ricky made his confession to him. Brent had only one thing to say, "Thank you," and he kissed the top of his head. Nate wasn't sure that was the right way to handle it, but Brent was the dad.

"I assume you already lectured him about it," Brent said seeing Nate's serious look as he lingered after Ricky left. "I'm just letting you be the disciplinarian."

"Thanks for that. That's a big favor you are doing me," Nate grumbled.

"You are the tough and sensible one," Brent added.

"Throw in sexy at least."

"That too, more than anything," Brent said earnestly.

"Now you're saying what I want to hear," Nate said but then got back to the subject of Ricky. "You didn't seem surprised by what Ricky did."

"It's not the first time." Brent sighed and told him more. "Georgie's little friend, Cynthia, isn't allowed to come over here any more. She and her brother had a play date with Georgie and Ricky. Cynthia's brother said I was a fag. Ricky asked what that was. The boy said it was a 'bad, dirty man'."

"So neither one of them knew what it meant," Nate concluded from the boy's ignorant answer.

Brent smiled.

"Ricky didn't like his answer either so he pushed him down and jumped on him. The boy got bruised a little. Pam didn't let it get any further than that. But Ricky was ready to tear that kid apart."

"So Ricky fights for your honor," Nate said.

"That kid is something," Brent said simply. Nate could tell by the look in his eyes that it meant a lot to him.

"It's just what any son would do for his dad," Nate said and made Brent grin with pride.

When Nate went back to the library, Brent joined him. Georgie was there too now. Brent went to sit with Ricky on the sofa.

"Hey, Georgette," Brent said as she came up to him.

She was ready to climb into his lap until he got her name wrong.

"No. It's not Georgette!" she said with a shake of her head.

"That's not your name?" Brent asked.

"It's Georgie," she insisted.

"Your whole name?"

"Georgina. Georgina Georgie." Her eyes were wide as she tried to convince him.

"You look like a Georgette."

"No. Ricky, tell him!" she said and pulled at Ricky, trying to enlist his help.

"He's just teasing you," Ricky told her. He refused to look up from his book.

"He's not backing you up, Georgette," Brent told her.

"No. It's not Georgette. Tell him, Ricky!" Georgie was now getting very rough with her brother.

"She's not Georgette," Ricky said listlessly.

"See. Ricky knows," Georgie said.

"He doesn't sound too sure," Brent said after he looked at Ricky skeptically.

"He's sure. Ricky is sure. Tell him!" Georgie demanded and jumped in place.

"I already told him," Ricky said.

"He doesn't look sure. Look at him, Georgette," Brent said as he put an arm around Ricky.

"Georgie! Georgie Georgina!" she yelled.

Brent let Ricky go and leaned forward.

"OK. Georgie Georgina, come sit with us."

She went to him but gave him a half smiling, half angry face. He sat her in his lap, and they both looked over at what Ricky was reading. He tried to ignore them, but Brent leaned over until he and Georgie almost smothered him. Georgie giggled. Ricky tried to glower, but he mostly just looked funny trying to suppress a grin.

Nate was enjoying the sight of Brent with his arms around both kids. Brent noticed Nate at his desk and smiled at him.

"She was named after my father, George," Brent said to him. "Greta and I were continuing a tradition. Ricky was named after Greta's father, Ricardo."

Ricky looked interested though it must have been a familiar story to him.

"Ricardo. Cool name," Nate told him.

"Tell Nate your full name," Brent urged Ricky.

"Ricardo Perea Morley Leighton." Ricky said it like it was all one word.

"That's impressive," Nate said. He had already seen the name on forms sent by the school. Each of his parents had given him their name. It was kind of nice even if it was cumbersome.

"Georgina Georgie Perea Leighton," Georgie said, not wanting to be left out then she twirled with her arms raised.

When the kids left them alone to go and play, Brent told Nate, "I actually wanted to name her Georgette, but Greta liked Georgina better. I thought that was nice too. I think she turned out to be a Georgina anyway. I thought she would be more like Greta and Ricky."

"But she's all you," Nate finished his thought.

"I hope not," Brent said and came over to sit on Nate's desk.

"Why? You're not so bad," Nate told him and ran his hand over his leg, enjoying the feel of muscles, tight under the fabric of his jeans.

"Maybe. But Greta really had her shit together," Brent said. Nate had noticed Brent's admiration for her before. Nate had mixed feelings about her, but maybe he was just jealous.

"Georgie is going to knock it out of the park. You'll see," Nate predicted. She had enough guts to conquer the world.

"And what about Ricky?" Brent asked like Nate was a fortuneteller.

"With you in his corner, he'll do amazing things," Nate told him.

Leaning over, Brent kissed him. But then he straightened with a funny look on his face.

"Do you think that when he grows up, Ricky is going to make us start calling him Rick?" Brent looked seriously worried about this.

"He has a choice, Ricky or Ricardo, Rick is not an option," Nate decided. He didn't like the name Rick either.

"Good to know. But I want him to stay my little Ricky forever."

"That's not an option either," Nate said. He wasn't just going to tell him what he wanted to hear, but he did kiss him.

Through the open window, Nate could hear the gardeners outside talking to each other. That meant he was sleeping late, not surprising considering what he and Brent had been up to half the night after Nate came home from his class. Nate could still feel Brent's muscles against him, his kisses hot on every part of him, his hard body begging to be fucked but still being denied. They satisfied each other over and over again. Then they went to sleep in each other's arms, sweat drenched and overheated. Really, Nate didn't mind. Discomfort faded from his awareness as he felt that body he loved relaxing against him.

Nate hadn't meant for it to happen, but he had fallen asleep with Brent in his arms. It was a habit for the two of them to hang out either in Brent's room or in Nate's and sometimes fall asleep side by side. Nate was always surprised to wake up next to Brent and realize that it happened again. Not wanting to rush into anything, Nate tried to keep a cool head, sleep alone at least sometimes. But in such a sexually charged atmosphere, with a man who turned him on like no other, it was inevitable. Two overheated bodies so close couldn't resist one another. Their mouths would find their way to each other. It was like a force pulled them together, locked their bodies in mutual desire. Sometimes Nate would start kissing Brent in mid sentence like the kiss was just a continuation of what he was saying. It was all so natural and so good. It hurt Nate to think that it could end. That's why he tried to slow down, but it might have been too late already. He couldn't imagine giving up Brent. He was too perfect. Just lying next to him was now something he couldn't live without.

And the next morning, Nate was a happy and irresponsible fool. Since neither the kids nor Brent were in their beds, Nate went to the kitchen. To his relief, he found Brent was right there with the kids giving them breakfast. What a good dad.

After the kids were gone, Nate thanked Brent for taking care of the kids instead of waking him.

"It was the least I could do. I took advantage of you on a school night and kept you up late," Brent said, taking responsibility while leering at Nate.

"And you still owe me a date," Nate said as he buried his face against Brent's shoulder and inhaled the intoxicating scent of his skin. Brent rubbed the back of his head and his ass. They were both starting to breathe hard. Nate pulled back to give Brent a long look.

"I should be trying to get you out of my head not memorizing you." Nate needed to have a clear head so he could concentrate at work and at school. Any thoughts of Brent made that impossible. Now Nate found it excruciating to have to leave him, but it had to be done.

Just as he came home from Miss Pullman's, Nate saw John going into the garage and looking around like he didn't want to be seen.

"Are you sneaking out," Nate asked him.

John jumped just as he was about to unlock a vintage Thunderbird convertible, his favorite car.

"Keep it down," he told Nate though he hadn't exactly shouted. "I'm making myself scarce before Quin asks me to go visit his family."

"You don't like them?"

John shook his head.

"His mom is great, but his grandmother has religious issues with gay people. It's better if I don't go and fan the flames. That way Quin can have a nice time," John said with a sad smile of regret. It was obvious to Nate that he wished he could go with Quin. "Quin is lucky to have a family. I don't want him fighting with them over me."

"That doesn't explain why you're sneaking," Nate told him.

"When Quin asks, I can't say no," John said. "You know, I never liked it when guys called me baby until I heard Quin say it. I hate how much I love him." Seeing skeptical Nate's look, he added, "You just wait till you are this much in love then you'll see how mad it makes you."

"If you say so," Nate said with a smirk, not believing him for a second.

"You are going to suffer," John predicted vindictively before he drove away.

Nate laughed. He wasn't surprised that Brent's smiling face flashed vividly through his mind just then. The truth was, he couldn't imagine Brent making him hate being in love. At the moment, Brent was out with friends. "I'm bragging that I bagged my hot manny," Brent had texted him. "Rub their noses in it," Nate texted back.

As he went inside, Nate enjoyed the feeling of missing Brent. He probably wouldn't if he had any doubts that he would be seeing him soon. That's why missing him was a sweet pain.

Thinking about his faith in Brent made Nate consider how things had worked out for him. He seemed shallow, but things in Brent's life had a way of turning from practical to real. When he hired John and Quin, Brent had hired himself a family. Nate wondered about his role. Did his role stop at Brent's bed and with taking care of the children, or was there more to it like he hoped? Nate could hide his feelings, bury them until he was sure, but that wasn't like him. Even if it hurt, he wasn't going to let being in love make him a coward. He chose to believe in Brent and in the love that was in his expressive eyes, in his touch, and in every kiss they shared.

Nate was catching up on some texts from his friends when he heard Georgie's voice down the hall. He found her in one of the sitting rooms. Ricky was playing with assorted action figures on the windowsill. Georgie had abandoned her toys on the rug. She was dancing around the room and singing.

"Icky Ricky! Icky Ricky!!" was how her song went.

Ricky was putting up with it stoically.

"What do you think you're doing?" Nate asked her getting in the way of her dance.

"Singing," she said as she looked up at him.

"You're singing a mean song. You better cut it out and say you're sorry," Nate told her, but she only started up again. "We'll see what your dad says about that," Nate threatened. He couldn't believe he was falling back on the old "Wait till your father gets home" routine, but he figured Brent's disapproval would mean more to her. It was Ricky who objected to this tactic though.

"Don't tell him," he said to Nate.

Nate turned from Ricky's imploring face to Georgie, who wasn't worried at all.

"You hear that? Ricky doesn't want you to get in trouble. He isn't icky, is he?"

None of this had any effect on Georgie. She just kept singing, and Ricky was still asking Nate not to tell Brent.

"Because Brent will be mad at her, is that right?" Nate asked him.

"Yeah, he'll be mad," Ricky confirmed.

Nate had never seen Brent get mad at either of the children, but maybe this was a special case.

"Maybe someone should get mad at her," Nate said, but Ricky disagreed with an emphatic shake of his head.

"Listen. We want Georgie to grow up to be a nice person, right?" Nate said, trying to make him understand that he wasn't doing Georgie any favors by letting her get away with this kind of thing. "That's why we have to teach her right from wrong. And that means you too. Tell Georgie not to call you names."

Ricky looked from Nate to Georgie then went up to her.

"You are not supposed to call me names," he told her.

"It's not names," Georgie said.

Ricky looked at Nate again but quickly turned back to Georgie.

"It's names! It's mean. And you better stop it, or I'll be mad at you!" Ricky told her, throwing in a little righteous anger to back up his words.

"Icky!" Georgie said to him. She wasn't one to back down.

But this time Ricky wasn't backing down either.

"You're icky!" he told her.

"No, I'm not!" Georgie yelled.

Nate decided to step in.

"It's not nice, is it, Georgie," Nate pointed out to her.

She scrunched up her face at him, still ready for a fight.

"You don't like being called names. So don't call Ricky names either. OK?" At his words, Georgie still looked kind of mad, but Nate was pretty sure that some part of that lesson got through to her.

Brent was home earlier than Nate expected. They met up in the foyer. Brent smiled when he saw Nate and hugged him. As further greeting, he kissed Nate like he hadn't seen him for days. Nate loved how Brent showed him he missed him without a word. It was in his deep, passionate kiss and also in the way he held him close while gazing into his eyes.

"And how was your day, dear?" he asked Nate.

"I made the kids fight," Nate told him and made him let go. The kids weren't in sight, but they might show up at any time. He wasn't sure how much of that kind of thing they should see just yet.

"Were boxing gloves involved?" Brent asked.

"I wanted Ricky to stand up to Georgie," Nate explained.

Brent knew exactly what Nate was talking about.

"Oh, God. She walks all over him. But if I try to take Ricky's side, he just jumps to her defense, and I end up looking like the bad guy. I guess you had better luck."

"I am a child care professional," Nate boasted.

"She takes Ricky for granted," Brent said. "He's been there since the day she was born. She doesn't know what it's like not to have a big brother. Some kid once tried to convince Georgie that Ricky was only her half brother. She said, 'No, Ricky is my whole brother.'"

"I guess Georgie knows what's what." She might have a funny way of expressing it, but Ricky was her world.

"We spoiled her rotten and it shows," Brent admitted.

Nate didn't disagree so Brent decided to explain his parenting style.

"I just don't have the heart to deny them or to punish them. I feel like any minute it could all disappear. It did before. Happiness can just evaporate. One minute it's there then it's gone."

"You better enjoy it when you've got it then," Nate told him.

"I enjoy myself plenty."

"But you're missing out too. You love being with the kids and you deny yourself. Not to mention, the kids need you. Mainly for comic relief," Nate said remembering how Georgie had said her dad was funny.

"Is that why you've been enticing me to stay home?"

"How have I been doing that?"

"By being here and being so irresistible." Brent proved it with another long kiss.

Since Brent was home, Nate decided they should all make dinner together. He had stocked the kitchen with pasta and sauce. He gave the kids small tasks. Georgie's main job was not to do anything too destructive. Brent had the opposite idea. He pretended not to be able to open the jar of spaghetti sauce.

"Here, you open it," Brent told Georgie and moved as if he would hand her the big, glass jar.

Nate grabbed it away from him and pointed Brent toward the big salad bowl. Brent and Ricky teamed up to make a salad. When Brent cut up an apple and some walnuts to add to the salad, Ricky asked Nate, "Is that OK?"

"I'm not the salad police," Nate told him. "Put whatever you want."

"M&M's!" Georgie screamed out.

"Go get them," Brent told her.

Ricky looked like he wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not. Nate called Brent's bluff and made no objections.

"We'll have them after," Brent told Georgie when she brought a half finished bag to him. He gave Nate a look that said, "You won this round."

Nate left Brent to do the dishes and took the kids to keep him company while he did some reading in the library. He made himself comfortable in an armchair even if it made taking notes a little harder. After a while he noticed what Georgie was up to.

She was piling books on top of the one Ricky was reading. He had to constantly slide his book out from under them.

"You are in fine form today," Nate told her. "What are you doing there, Georgie?"

"I'm bothering Ricky," she said.

"It's nice that you are upfront about it. But wouldn't you rather read something too?" Nate asked her. Her version of reading was to look at the pictures and call out what she saw.

"She can't read," Ricky said.

Georgie contradicted him immediately, "I can too."

"No, you can't. You just make things up," Ricky said while Georgie tried to stare him down.

"So?" she said.

"That's not reading," Ricky told her.

"Want me to teach you to read?" Nate offered mostly so Ricky could have a little peace.

Georgie came over eagerly, carrying a book, and climbed into his lap. What Ricky said was true, of course. Georgie pretended to read while looking at the book and just made up her own disjointed, nonsensical story. Nate tried to get her to focus on individual letters. G for Georgie and R for Ricky were the two letters she already knew. Nate showed her the letters in other people's names. Now instead of reading the actual words, she just called out people's names.

"It's a good thing she's cute," Brent said after hearing a little of Nate's valiant struggle to educate Georgie. He had sneaked up to stand over the armchair where Nate held Georgie and a book.

"You want me to teach you to read," Nate said to Brent.

"Move over, Georgie. I want to sit in his lap," Brent told her, but she wasn't budging.

She did make a suggestion.

"Ask Ricky to teach you. He knows reading too," she said to her dad.

Brent did as he was told. He sat cross-legged on the carpet across from Ricky.

"Georgie said you're supposed to teach me to read," Brent said to him.

"You know how to read," Ricky told him.

"Are you sure? Have you ever seen me read?"

"Yes," Ricky said right away.

"Darn. My secret is out. I do know how to read," Brent said.

To prove it, he read to the kids for a while. His version of reading was a lot like Georgie's. He made up a lot of it. At first, Ricky wanted to object, but soon he was too busy laughing. He was delighted when a brave, blue eyed boy named Ricky made an appearance in Brent's version of the story as well as Santa Claus and Bigfoot. While Brent looked for another book he could mangle, Quin marched into the library.

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm requisitioning these guys," Quin said gathering Ricky and Georgie. "Go get ready. We're going to visit with Grandma Ruby and my mom."

Georgie loved the idea.

"Lemon bars!" she yelled.

"Yeah, my mom has the lemon bars ready for us," Quin said.

"Don't try to eat all of them again, Georgie," Ricky told her. "They are for Quin. His mom made them for him."

"I like lemon bars too," Georgie said.

Seeing that an argument was about to start, Quin warned them, "You kids get that out of your system right now. I don't want to be hearing that noise the whole drive over there." He turned to Georgie and told her, "Or no lemon bars for you."

"Will that work?" Nate asked him as Georgie went upstairs. He was wondering if lemon bars had special power over her.

"Not likely. She'll call anyone's bluff," Quin said then turned to Ricky, who was still lingering.

"Are Russ and Cal going to be there?" Ricky asked.

"Not today. You can watch TV with grandma," Quin told Ricky and sent him to get ready too.

Then he explained to Nate, "My sister's step kids were there last time. They all played together. But this is not playtime. I need those kids to distract my grandmother. She's gone extra religious since my uncle died. Now every time I go to visit her and my mom, she preaches at me. Then she and Mom fight about it. The kids are going to be keeping Grandma busy so I can visit with my mom in peace."

Nate noticed that Brent was grinning.

Quin looked from Nate to Brent.

"You two guys, play it safe," he told them.

Nate went up to help the kids get ready, or God knows what Georgie would end up wearing.

When Quin and the kids were ready to leave, Brent kissed the children and whispered something to them. Quin and Nate both looked at him suspiciously.

"Don't worry, we'll make your grandma be nice to you," Ricky

promised Quin just as they were getting into the car.

Brent tried to look innocent while Quin grinned at him and shook his head.

Nate and Brent waved to the kids from the driveway as they left.

"We have the house to ourselves. Let's get crazy," Brent said as he moved to go in. Nate turned toward the garage.

"I want to test drive another one."

"Don't make me sound like a car salesman," Brent objected, then he looked at Nate. "Or do you want to test drive the back seat maybe or the hood?"

"This test drive starts with me behind the wheel. After a couple of miles of road, we'll see what kind of deal you can offer me."

Brent rubbed his hands together and said, "OK. Which one?"

As Nate was deciding, the Range Rover caught his eye.

"Quin said your dad had one," he said to Brent.

"Actually Mom and Dad had matching ones. Mom was always driving off in Dad's Range Rover. He would hide the keys, and she would always find them. Then he would look out the window, see her driving away, and yell, 'Not again!' Mom would stick her hand out the window and wave. So he got her a Range Rover of her own, but she still always took his." A smile lit up his face though his eyes were a little bit sad. "They really loved each other. That's why I felt so bad that my marriage couldn't be like theirs."

Nate had seen pictures of Brent's parents, always with their arms around each other, always smiling. He was silent for a while. He was debating with himself if he should say what he was thinking.

"Maybe you'll get another chance," he finally said.

"Next time I'll make sure it's the real thing." Brent had an intense look in his eyes when he said this. It seemed like there was a message in that look just for Nate.

"If you pick the right guy, that shouldn't be a problem," Nate said and kissed him. He cut the kiss short before Brent's on the hood of the car fantasy became a reality.

Since the kids weren't coming, this was Nate's chance to try out the Maserati, which was strictly a two-seater.

"Keep a firm grip on the steering wheel, I don't want you to lose control of the car while I'm groping you," Brent told him as they pulled out. He wasn't kidding either. His busy hands definitely challenged Nate's ability to concentrate. They drove out of Bridgegrove and headed toward less traveled roads where Nate could hit the gas and let the engine roar. After breaking the speed limit for a while, Nate looked for where to go next. Brent pointed to the gas gage as a gas station came into view.

Just as The Feeling's "Helicopter" came on, they pulled in to fill up

the tank. Brent got out his card to pay, but Nate stopped him.

"Go in and pay for gas, then buy me some gum and we'll call it a date," Nate told him.

Brent's eyes lit up, but he still said, "You take being a cheap date to a whole new level."

A little later, he came back with a pack of gum and several boxes of condoms.

"Damn, Brent, I'm not a football team or an army," Nate told him.

"I just wanted to scandalize the girl at the register."

"Whatever gets you off," Nate said as he drove away.

"I said a girl."

They drove on roads that meandered through empty fields and nature preserves. The light was dimming. Distant lights of houses and cars were becoming more prominent, but there weren't many ahead. A deserted two-lane road called to Nate and he turned. As the road curved gently and there were no other cars around, Nate hit the gas pretty hard. He enjoyed how the car took each curve like he was carving the road with a sharp knife. Brent's hand on his leg squeezed him in excitement.

Nate only glimpsed the field for a fraction of a second as he went by. That meant it was perfect. He slowed then backed up. Driving off the road, he turned into a small opening between some bushes and trees. He continued forward until the car was well hidden.

"You know how to drive and how to drive a man crazy," Brent complimented him as he leaned over for a kiss. Their tongues glided over one another. Nate stopped and looked deep into Brent's eyes.

They got out of the car and grappled with each other as they kissed again. Brent put his hand down to ease himself onto the low hood of the Maserati.

"Nope," he said as he straightened. "You got the engine all hot too." Brent pouted and looked around for a spot they could use.

Nate wasn't too disappointed.

"The hood wasn't my goal anyway," he told Brent. "Come on."

The sky was a deep blue edged with gold along the horizon. Every shade of green was darkening as the sun was setting. Nate led the way until he found the field again. It was hidden from view in all directions, not just along the road. Tall bushes almost swallowed the old wooden fence on two sides. On the other two sides, the fence sagged under the deepening shade of some trees, the beginning of a forest. A sliver of the field could be seen from the road. Nate made sure they moved away from there. He chose a patch where the grass grew long and soft.

"Is this the spot?" Brent asked, guessing that they had arrived. He linked his arms around Nate's waist to bring him close. Nate grunted

as their mouths met, hungry for each other.

They didn't stay upright long. Pulling each other down, they rolled around in the grass. At first they kissed and laughed, but then they needed to save their breaths. Their kisses became heart-stopping, hard and deep. Again they had to stop just to catch their breaths. They both laughed and looked at each other. Then things got serious. Getting on top of Nate, Brent straddled his legs and unbuckled his belt. He unbuttoned his own fly so Nate could grope him. Impatient for Nate's cock, he pulled his hand away and lowered his face to Nate's cock still trapped, straining against the fabric of his boxers. Brent freed it, stroking the hard length of it. He felt it get even harder and thicker in his mouth and moaned. Not letting himself get carried away, he sat up again on top of Nate. He was flushed and beautiful in the fading light. Digging his heels into the dirt, Nate raised his hips and Brent pulled off his jeans and boxers roughly. Nate tugged at Brent's too, until he was free of them. They took their shirts off hurriedly. Now they were both naked and out in the open air. They were breathing hard, cocks jutting, ready. Nate was on top of Brent, bringing him down, kissing him. Brent turned over, head down, clutching at the long grass they had trampled.

"Can't wait any more," he gasped.

Nate went digging through the pockets of his discarded jeans for lube and a condom. Brent reached back to feel his cock one more time before the condom went on. Nate lubed him quickly. Brent's moans intensified as he pushed in further, added a finger then stroked him with three. He was still tight, but he was ready, clutching at Nate's side to pull him in. Careful despite his urging, Nate pressed the head of his cock against his ass and watched it give, swallow him up as Brent gasped. Nate felt the opening and closing of his muscles subside, and he pushed in to the sound of Brent calling his name. As his whole body throbbed with need, he waited for Brent to surface from the mindless pleasure that only called for more. Brent's body welcomed him inch by inch until Nate was fully inside, running his hands over Brent's back and his thighs. Gasping moans answered him as he pulled back against Brent's body trying to drag him down. His thrusts were deep and slow. Brent approved them with a "Yes, please, yes!"

The strain of Brent's muscles, the sweat pouring down, drove Nate harder and deeper. Brent pushed back, showing Nate what he could take.

"I want to see you," Brent said.

"I'll finish you face to face," Nate promised as he slowed the pace, not ready to let either of them come. He pulled out, and Brent let out a growl of displeasure at the loss. He flipped over quickly and glared at Nate, who couldn't help but laugh since he had asked for the

change of position.

"Nate!" Brent warned him as he panted and raised his gorgeous, muscled legs. Nate's thrust was almost a shove. Brent arched under its power, gripped Nate hard with his legs to pull him in closer.

"Nate." His name was now said lovingly, as praise.

If he had been looking at him like this from the start, Nate wouldn't have been able to last. Brent's eyes were beautiful and burning into him. His name sounded even sweeter as he watched Brent's mouth say it as a moan. He pounded him and watched his head thrown back, throat corded, every muscle etched. Brent was too beautiful as he came, pulsing hot against him. Nate followed as Brent's whole body tightened like a vice around him. Dizzy with the release of pleasure, Nate didn't let either one of them catch their breaths before he was kissing Brent, trying to say his name. He was trying to say and show too much at the same time while Brent did the same. They both calmed down, maybe through loss of oxygen. Though their passion had subsided, they still clutched at each other, pressed their sweating bodies close.

"You like an outdoor fuck, don't you?" Brent said, rubbing his head against Nate's chest.

"Now and then," Nate admitted.

"We can do it in the bushes at home any time you want," Brent offered. He was still a little breathless.

"It's not the same," Nate said. Then he quickly added, "That wasn't a no."

Brent laughed.

"You have a kink you want me to satisfy?" Nate asked.

"My only kink is you," Brent said so sweetly.

"I can satisfy that one easy," Nate told him and kissed him again.

With his head on Nate's chest, Brent traced the outlines of his muscles with his fingertips. It had been everything he had ever wanted from a fuck and more because it was Nate. Brent looked around. The trees were dark against a blue-black sky. Stars were becoming visible between wispy clouds that glowed in the night. Brent could tell that it was getting cold, but he couldn't feel it. He could smell grass and feel Nate's body against him. They were together, naked, warm and happy. It was the best night of his life.

Nate wished they could have slept out there, but as two responsible adults, kind of, they decided to go home. Quin had already brought the kids back and was sitting with them past their bedtime. Nate felt like he was glowing, grinning like a fool. Quin clapped him on the back as he left. Both kids looked at Nate funny when he and Brent put them to bed. Once the kids were asleep, Brent took his hand to lead him to his bedroom, but Nate shook his head. After their lovemaking, it wasn't easy to tell Brent he wouldn't be sleeping over, but Nate felt overwhelmed, like his brain had been fried. And if Brent was within reach, he wouldn't get any sleep.

In the middle of the night, Nate came out of his room a little disoriented. He had been woken by something. The sound had been Ricky crying out. By the time he got to his room, Brent was already there.

"Mommy! Georgie!" Ricky yelled.

"Shh. It's me. I'm here," Brent was telling him. He was taking Ricky in his arms.

"Georgie is sick! She's gonna die!" Ricky said in a panic.

"No, she isn't. She's fine. We'll go see her. Georgie is fine. There's nothing wrong with Georgie," Brent told him emphatically but in a low voice.

Nate could see Ricky's hands clutching desperately at the back of Brent's t-shirt as Brent held him.

Nate looked in on Georgie quickly. She hadn't woken up. He touched her forehead gently. She was only warm from sleep. There was nothing wrong with her. Nate went back to Ricky's room. Seeing that it was still only lit by the light from the hallway, he warned them, "I'm turning the light on." Then he gave his report.

"I just checked on Georgie. She's sleeping and she's fine," he told Ricky, who didn't react.

Brent was holding Ricky as he struggled to calm down. His eyes were still a little wild as Brent wiped his tears and pushed his sweat dampened hair off his face. Since Ricky was quiet now, Brent picked him up and carried him to Georgie's room. There, he let him down. Georgie had a small lamp on. It was dim, but it let Ricky see her. Ricky went close and peered at her. After a while he seemed to become convinced that she was OK. He calmed down, but he didn't move.

Brent turned to Nate and whispered, "Can you bring Ricky's pillow and blanket?"

Brent went to sit down on the floor, with his back against Georgie's bed. When Nate came back and handed Brent the pillow and blanket, Brent put the pillow over his outstretched legs and touched Ricky's shoulder. For a minute Ricky only looked at him. Brent tapped the pillow. Ricky curled himself against it, and Brent covered him up. For a while Nate only stared at them. Then Brent looked up at him and smiled. He mouthed, "He's OK now."

The next morning, Nate was up early. As a reward, he got to see Georgie's reaction when she found Brent and Ricky sleeping on the floor of her room. Brent was slumped against the side of her bed with his arms around Ricky. Ricky was curled around one of Brent's arms, using it as a pillow. The pillow and blanket Nate had brought were off to the side. When Georgie opened her eyes, she laughed in surprise and clapped her hands.

"Slumber party!" she yelled, waking up her father and brother.

Brent looked a little confused about where he was. Ricky put on that cute, embarrassed face that always made Nate smile.

After the kids had gone to school, Nate had a few minutes to spend with Brent.

"You could have stayed," Brent told him about last night.

"That was father-son time," Nate said.

"I talked to Quin," Brent told him as they each had a second cup of coffee. "He mentioned that Ricky might have heard his grandmother talking to a friend of hers about someone who was in the hospital and not expected to make it. That kind of thing sets him off sometimes," Brent said. "When Greta died, Ricky got it into his head that something could happen to Georgie. He gets frantic if Georgie is sick. Even a little fever or a cough can set him off. Then he refuses to leave her. We had to keep him out of school so he could stay with her when she had a cold. He's better than he was. But as that nightmare proved, he's not over it."

"That looked like some kind of routine," Nate said remembering how Brent arranged himself on the floor.

"Right after Greta died, Ricky couldn't sleep if he was away from Georgie. The two of us would stay in her room like that. That's the only way he would go to sleep. And I wanted to be with the kids too. Death was too real in those days, too close."

Nate realized that Brent and Ricky shared the same fears, and Brent knew exactly how to calm him. Without him there, Nate wasn't sure he would have known what to do or say. That worried him, and it also made him envious of Brent. He really did have amazing instincts. And whatever their issues, he and Ricky had a strong father-son bond. That

was so clear last night.

It was an overcast, gloomy day. Nate was glad when it finally started raining. After he and the kids came home and had a snack, Nate and Ricky lingered at the kitchen table. The droplets of rain were on the window, but it only drizzled now. They talked about some stuff he learned in school and then went off on a tangent. Ricky had finished his snack, but he had become engrossed in a discussion of shifting continents. It was kind of beyond him, but it made his eyes go wide with wonder, so Nate had to tell him more. Nate caught Brent watching the two of them. Brent had a funny look on his face. Once he sent Ricky to wash his hands, Nate asked him about it.

"What's with you?"

"You and Ricky. You two are kindred spirits, and I'm jealous as hell."

"Pick up a book sometimes," Nate urged him, but he knew Brent didn't need to do anything. Last night he had seen for himself how close Brent and Ricky really were. He just wanted to play on Brent's show of ignorance and disdain for anything scholarly. Brent played along.

"Books only exist so unattractive people have something to hide behind." Brent pretended to hold a book open in front of his face to demonstrate.

"You are even jealous of books."

"Both of you like books better than me," Brent whined.

Nate wanted to tell him how jealous he had been of him. He had never envied people with kids before, but Georgie and Ricky were special to him now. Brent was lucky. Instead of saying any of that, Nate kissed him.

"There. I've never kissed a book in my life," he told Brent.

"I'm not sure I believe you," Brent said.

"It doesn't count if there's no tongue," Nate said as Brent nuzzled and sniffed him. "Why are you sniffing me?" Nate asked.

"I want to see if you smell like old books."

"And?'

"You smell nice."

"I'm warning you though. I have work to do," Nate told him.

Nate and Ricky were reading quietly when Georgie ran into the library.

"John is talking to Pammy!" Georgie announced. She then ran to tell her father then back to John in the office so she could bug him. She wasn't the only one though. Brent came by to collect Nate, saying he wanted to introduce him to Pam. Ricky ran ahead eager to talk to her too.

"Is it the 50's? Is there only one phone in this house?" Nate asked seeing everyone assembled in the office along with Quin who was already there. Nate knew that the kids talked to Pam regularly and John even more often. He didn't see why they needed to hijack his phone.

"We can't let John hog her," Brent said.

Georgie agreed.

"I wanna talk to Pammy!" Georgie demanded and jumped up and down next to John, reaching for his phone.

"Wait your turn, G," Quin told her. He picked her up to keep her from trying to grab the phone from John. Quin spun her around and said, "Show me that mean face I taught you."

As Georgie made a face that was more funny than mean, Quin encouraged her, "Yeah, like that. Look tough, like you're going to tear me apart, like you're really going to mess me up."

Georgie's face only looked more comical. "A'ight, G, keep working on it. Grow some facial hair maybe," he told her. Seeing that John was ready to let her talk to Pam, Quin let her down.

At one point, as she was speaking to Pam, Georgie said, "Kiss, kiss, kiss" into the phone. Hearing her, Brent got a strange look on his face then smiled. Ricky seemed startled. His eyes never left Georgie as he pulled on Brent's sleeve.

"She said, 'Kiss, kiss, kiss'. That's what Mommy used to say every time she talked to me on the phone," Ricky whispered.

"I told Georgie about that. I guess now she does it too," Brent said. When Ricky looked up at him, Brent smiled.

Ricky turned to look at Georgie. She smiled at him too, and he blinked away tears. He stayed close to Brent, who squeezed him even closer with an arm around his shoulders.

While stretching his legs after too much sitting, Nate had been idly looking over the titles on the shelves in the library. By chance he noticed that something was under some books. He pulled out a photo of Brent and Greta. It was clear from the way she looked in the picture that she was very sick. Next to her, Brent stood looking kind of unhealthy himself, thin and drawn. Seeing that John was still in the office, Nate showed him the picture.

"Brent still sort of looked like that when I started working for him," John said. "He didn't sleep much either. He said he lost the habit." John shook his head as he looked at that picture. "I can't believe how people talk about him, and he was right there for her every minute."

"What do they say?" Nate wanted to know.

"Crap like he influenced Greta when she was sick, drugged her, or threatened her into changing her will and letting him adopt Ricky so he could get control of his inheritance. No one can touch Ricky's money or Georgie's. Greta made sure of that. But even before she died, there were wild rumors that he brought guys here while she was sick and had parties and orgies while she was dying. Even that he killed her."

"Fuck! Who the hell is saying this shit?" Nate said.

"Assholes with nothing better to do. They don't know one fucking thing about him." John looked at Nate and saw that he was pissed off too now so he told him, "It's not as bad any more. It was worse right after Greta died. Things have calmed down since then."

Nate couldn't believe that anyone could say those things about Brent. As soon as he met him, Nate knew that whatever his faults, Brent was incapable of cruelty or callousness. He wanted to talk to Brent about this, but tonight's dinner and a movie plans got in the way.

Quin had cooked them all dinner and that meant he got to choose which movie they watched in the big TV room.

"I've seen every Bruce Lee movie at least a million times," John complained as he came in with two big bowls of popcorn. He had to hold them above his head so Georgie couldn't grab them.

"It's not my fault the man didn't make enough movies before he died," Quin said coming in behind him.

"It is your fault that you're in love with him," John said.

"The man is long dead, baby, you got nothing to worry about," Quin assured him.

Tonight's movie wasn't Bruce Lee though.

"*Kung Fu Zombie*? That's quality entertainment," Nate said when he

saw what was on the menu.

Hearing the name of the movie, Georgie started kicking and punching the air in an uncoordinated way.

"Watch it, G, you'll knock yourself out," Quin warned her.

"I'm strong," she said.

For the movie, Quin made the kids sit on either side of him. Nate saw why later on. It was so he could censor the movie for them. Quin must have had the movie memorized. He knew just when to cover their eyes. Georgie tried to pull his hand down, yelling, "I'm missing it! I'm missing it!"

"I should make you put her to bed," Nate said to Quin when he saw how worked up she was getting.

"Not my job, Nanny Nate," Quin said.

Just as Nate predicted, it was a struggle to put the kids to bed after that much excitement. Once they were down, Nate was ready to go join Brent in his room, but Brent showed up at his door.

"Saved you a trip," he said and pulled Nate into a sudden kiss.

They kissed for a while. But what John said was on Nate's mind so he stopped. Nate had stuck the picture of Brent and Greta in a book. He took it out and showed it to Brent, who looked at it sadly.

"Pam took pictures on Ricky's birthday and had them developed for the kids. Greta didn't like looking at that one. She stared at it and said, 'This is what I look like? Like death warmed over?' So I stashed it. I didn't even know where it ended up."

"It was under some books in the library," Nate told him.

He considered how Brent looked now and in the picture. He was so young and even younger in the picture. But in the picture, he didn't look it.

"Judging from this, you drove yourself pretty hard," Nate said.

"She needed me. It was my chance to do something for her. I wasn't going to let her down." As he said that, Brent wore a look of stubborn determination, like nothing mattered except being there for Greta.

"She must have had nurses?"

Brent looked pained and far away as he answered.

"Sure. But it's not the same. When you need someone to hold your hand through the pain and the fear of dying, you need someone who cares, who knows you. Plus she liked to talk about the kids, to hear old stories, new stories, it didn't matter. When she felt up to it, she would tell me things from before we were married so I could tell Ricky and Georgie after she was gone. She often couldn't sleep at night so we spent a lot of time together."

"You must have become close," Nate said as he sat on the bed and touched Brent's hand lightly. He was thinking about how quickly he

had fallen for Brent. He found it hard to believe that Greta could be married to him and resist him.

"Not in that way," Brent said like he knew what he was thinking. "Greta was still in love with her late husband." Brent closed his eyes then went on, "She would say, 'My beautiful Brent,' and she would look right through me. I knew she was thinking about him."

"Did that bother you?" Nate asked. From Brent's expression when he talked about it, it didn't seem to.

"I wanted to be with a man, she wanted to be with a dead man. I had no right to complain."

"You guys had a weird marriage," Nate said, looking up at him.

"It kind of worked though. We got along. We both loved the kids and cared about each other." Brent shrugged.

"I guess that's something."

Neither one of them thought it was enough.

"I just had to bury this longing inside me," Brent said and took both of Nate's hands in his. "While I was with Greta, I thought it was a longing to be with men. But then I got that. I fucked some unbelievably gorgeous guys."

"Don't brag," Nate told him, interrupting, and pulling his hands away.

Brent smiled and sat next to him on the bed.

"But the feeling didn't go away. It wasn't a longing for guys, it was for something else."

"The one guy," Nate said.

"No. I think I wanted to love someone as much as Greta loved her late husband." As he said this, Brent looked at him.

"Isn't that what I just said?" Nate asked as Brent held his gaze.

Brent shook his head without breaking eye contact.

"No," he insisted. "I wanted someone I could never forget. Someone who would obliterate till death do us part. A love that can't die."

"Wow," was all Nate could say.

"Stupid, I know," Brent admitted as he looked down.

Nate moved closer and slipped his arm around Brent’s back.

"Love is stupid, but if you go for it, you might as well go for broke."

"Really?" Raising his head, Brent was surprised that Nate agreed with him. But Nate agreed only with part of it.

"I just told you, you have to grab for all of it. But throw the death stuff right out the window. Don't make love all gloomy and shit. I don't think Greta was a good role model," Nate said as he held him close.

"Maybe you want to teach me some stuff," Brent said and skimmed his hand up Nate's thigh.

"I'm hands on. I lead by example." Nate in turn ran his hands over

Brent's chest. The contours were familiar now but no less wonderful. The more he got to know Brent's body, the more he wanted to touch it again and again.

Nate had meant to ask Brent about those rumors, but he put it off. His hands were on Brent, digging under his clothes, searching for bare skin. Nate's lips brushed over Brent's as his hands found their way under his belt and slipped down. Brent unbuckled and unzipped so Nate could grope him freely. For a while, Nate enjoyed the feel of him growing bigger and harder in his hand. Desire shot through him in powerful waves.

"Look what you're doing to me," Brent accused breathlessly.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of you," Nate promised.

"That's what I like to hear."

"Eventually," Nate added.

"Damn! Why are you doing this to me?" Brent said and dropped back on the bed. He gasped as Nate's touch made him want more.

"Driving you crazy is fun," Nate said. He stopped fondling him so he could pull off his shirt.

"I know something else that's fun," Brent said.

As Nate kissed his chest and licked his nipples, Brent's head was thrown back, his mouth parted. His perfectly muscled chest expanded with heavy breathing. Nate kissed his throat.

"It's even more fun if you build up to it slowly," Nate whispered between kisses, and Brent moaned.

"I hate you."

Nate kissed his mouth, feeling Brent's erection pushing against him insistently. Nate kissed his chin then his chest moving down slowly. Since he had promised to tease Brent, he didn't want to disappoint him. After pulling off Brent's jeans, he moved his face to his cock. He licked and kissed then sucked his cock never putting enough pressure to make him come.

"I'm going to lose it," Brent panted.

"No, you aren't. Be good."

"Damn," he groaned as Nate used all of his self control to keep Brent on the brink of coming.

Brent felt like every inch of him had been kissed, licked and nibbled before he was finally allowed to come. Working his cock slowly, Nate brought him to a new height of arousal. His mouth was a gentle, silky, hot instrument of torture. The final release of pleasure was so agonizing, so good, Brent was afraid he would scream. But Nate knew what he had done to him. He clamped a hand over Brent's mouth. After coming, Brent felt both exhausted and energized. He was still

buzzing with an overload of arousal. Nate's hands moved over his body. The way he was digging in, gripping hard, told him how much Nate needed him. Brent flipped them over so he was on top. Still trying to catch his breath, Brent kissed Nate hard anyway, wanting to show him how much he wanted him. Nate grabbed his head and held him down for a long, deep kiss. Brent wanted to dive into him and never come up for air, but Nate's hips were grinding into him, his cock rock hard, aching for Brent. Brent pulled his mouth away from Nate's with regret. Moving down, he let his teeth lightly graze Nate's nipples. In response Nate arched his back. Brent felt that his touch was guided by Nate's body. It told him where to put his mouth, where to lick, when to bite. It told his hands where to stroke, where to linger, where to press. Brent could feel his own cock hardening. Nate noticed too. He pushed Brent off and shifted down so they were head to toe. His mouth was on Brent again. His fingers teased Brent's asshole. Lapping at his balls gently, Brent held off his desire for Nate's cock. He licked it lovingly and didn't suck as hard as he wanted to, as hard as Nate was sucking him. He built up to it until there was only one rhythm, one motion, one pleasure coursing through both of them and they came together. Brent turned over so they were both upside down and kissed Nate, who smiled at him blissfully.

Their kiss was lazy as they started to get sleepy. They didn't want to let go of each other and break contact. It seemed to Brent that they fell asleep without breaking off the kiss. The kiss continued in his dreams and never ended until next morning when he woke up happy with Nate next to him.

Upside down in his bed, Brent was entwined with Nate. Gazing at Nate's sleeping face, he basked in the happiness of that moment. He felt transformed. Though he had longed for the feeling of an endless, all consuming love, Brent didn't know if he could feel that way about anyone until he met Nate. He had never even come close. It had made him wonder if something was missing in him. Maybe he wasn't capable of that kind of love. But now Nate was stirring up that feeling in him. It must have been hiding deep in his heart all this time, waiting for Nate. Love was so new to him, and it was knocking him around so much, Brent was disoriented. All he knew was that he wanted Nate, and he wanted to be close to him. He still worried that he was around too much and that Nate would get sick of him. But Nate made him feel less confined when he stayed home. When he was with him, Brent didn't have that feeling of suffocation and failure. If he wanted to be honest, these days, Brent's main reason for going out was to give Nate some space. He wasn't trying to run from his deepening feelings for Nate, but he did try to act like he was the same old Brent. No one was fooled. His friends questioned him. He told

them little, but they could read the answers on his face. He was in love, and they pretended to be horrified. Even casual acquaintances noticed that something was different about him. Sometimes it seemed to Brent, that everyone could see. His love for Nate was just too powerful to hide. He felt like he was a new Brent, more complete as a man and as a father, stronger and less afraid. Brent promised himself that if he got Nate, he would hold on and never let go.

Earlier that week, when Nate had been speaking to his mom, Brent told him to invite her for the weekend.

"Pam's mom stayed here when she was visiting," he told Nate.

Now Nate was on his way to pick her up in the Maserati. Seeing the car, she jokingly asked him if he stole it then she refused to get in it.

"I'll get whiplash."

Knowing her, Nate took her bag and put it in the back.

"All my life I've been asking myself why I got stuck with such a weird Mom," Nate said. When he tried to get back behind the wheel, she didn't let him.

"Move over. I'm driving." She wasn't kidding either. With a few wrong turns, she drove them back to Brent's.

Brent came out to meet them as they pulled up in front of the house. Seeing her come out from the driver's side, Brent grinned at her.

"My kind of woman," he said as he went up to greet her.

Nate's mom stared at him in open admiration.

"This is the one you've been hiding from me," she scolded Nate. To Brent, she said, "I've only seen parts of you."

"Mom, do you hear yourself?" Nate said since it sounded kind of suggestive, to him anyway.

"What? It's your doing," she said.

"Hi, Mrs. ..." Brent started to say, sounding almost shy, but Nate's mother interrupted him.

"Just call me Sarah," she told him as she took his arm.

"Don't get a crush on him, Mom," Nate warned her as he carried her bag. Then he said to Brent, "She had a crush on one of my exes because he was a pastry chef. They still see each other."

"I buy pastries where he works for the girls at the office. And don't tell him everything about me," she objected.

"Mom, what's there to tell?"

"Hush, I am a fascinating and mysterious woman."

For his part, Brent couldn't stop smiling at her. Maybe he should be warned not to get a crush on her.

When they walked in, Georgie didn't wait for introductions, she just ran right up to her.

"It's Georgie!" Nate's mom said as she hugged her. "Have you been a good girl for my Nate?" she asked.

"Yes," Georgie said without hesitation.

"You need to do some soul searching before you answer," Nate told her to remind her of some of her behavior, but she was either oblivious, or she had some other definition of being good.

Hanging back, Ricky waited to be introduced and looked at Nate's mom almost in awe. It broke Nate's heart and made him feel very grateful to have her.

Once they sat down in one of the sitting rooms, Georgie climbed into her lap without an invitation, and she wasn't gentle about it.

"Oof," Nate's mom said.

"Hey, Georgie, you break her, you bought her," Nate told her. He noticed that Brent and Ricky had disappeared.

When he asked Georgie about them, she said, "They're cooking dinner. I'm supposed to stay here and keep Nate's mommy company so she doesn't get bored with just you."

Nate stared at her for several reasons. Mainly he wondered what she meant by cooking. Instead of going to see for himself, he waited patiently to be called to dinner.

For dinner, they used the small dining room, which seated twelve. Quin and John joined them, and Nate's mom gushed over how good-looking they were. Brent brought in serving dishes with food. Ricky brought in serving utensils. Georgie was jealous, so Brent had her bring extra napkins, which she would need. Dinner was supposed to be something Brent ordered in, but it obviously wasn't. It had the imperfect look of homemade food.

"You can cook!" Nate said once all the evidence was in front of him.

"Everything looks wonderful," his mother said while Nate glared at Brent.

"Why have we been eating frozen pizzas?" Nate asked.

"Pizza!" Georgie yelled.

Brent pointed at her as the reason.

"I only cook on special occasions," Brent said when Nate continued to glare.

"From now on, every day is special," Nate told him and attacked the food. There was apple and bacon stuffed pork and a sautéed dish with green vegetables and star fruit. Nate's mom went crazy over the parmesan puffs. There was also a salad with olives, grapes and fresh mozzarella. Brent was in more trouble with every delicious bite Nate took. He even spared a dirty look for Quin and John since they must have known about his hidden talent. For dessert, there was a pear and cheese tart that the kids thought was weird. Nate's mom loved it, but she adamantly refused a second piece then immediately demanded one.

Brent sat at the head of the table loaded down with the food he made. It was a good feeling, and he would get a lot more of it now that Nate knew he could cook. He had a hunch that cooking for Nate

wouldn't be a chore. And unlike the kids, he seemed to appreciate his creativity. Ricky beamed with shy pride when Brent gave him credit for his help. He blushed when Nate's mom called him a little chef.

"Me too!" Georgie yelled.

"What are you taking credit for?" Quin asked her. "First learn how to eat, G."

But even Nate's mom couldn't get her to eat with a fork. Seeing Georgie's terrible table manners, she looked at Nate.

"I'm working on it," he told her and she sighed.

Georgie's lack of dining skills earned Brent another dirty look from Nate. Brent kind of liked it. When his eyes flashed fiercely like that, Nate was attractive in a whole new way. But he had to put those kinds of thoughts aside in present company. He saw that kids were playing with their food instead of eating it. While Quin awed Nate's mom with his plans for the future and Nate teased her, John was shy and polite.

Though she was nothing like his own mother, Nate's mom stirred something in Brent's heart. A small, bright eyed woman, she had a way of looking at people that reminded him of Nate. Her stare was more inquisitive but just as direct and open. From the way she looked at him, Brent could swear that she knew about him and Nate. She was lively, sweet and argumentative at the same time. In her company, Brent felt more nostalgic and grief-stricken than he had in a long time.

So far his mom's visit was a success. Nate was glad that she liked everyone, especially that she liked Brent. That night, Nate was sitting on his bed, waiting for him to show up in his room.

"I'm going to chain you to the stove," Nate threatened as soon as he walked in.

"I want you to chain me to the bed," Brent said and tried to kiss him.

Nate evaded him.

"I promise I'll cook. Now gimme." Brent leaned over him while Nate leaned back until he was flat on the bed. Straddling him, Brent looked down.

"You waiting for something?" Nate asked since he was expecting more action than being stared at, even if the look was hot enough to burn right through him.

"I like what I see."

"You can look and touch," Nate told him, getting impatient. He had his hands on Brent already. Running his hands up his thighs and then around, he pulled Brent down on top of him. With Brent above him, Nate gave him a few quick kisses that only teased before they moved down his throat. He felt Brent's quick, strong pulse against his lips. His heartbeat grew stronger as he licked. He stopped there until Brent

groaned. They stripped off their clothes, throwing them aside carelessly. Nate moved his hands over Brent's powerful chest, lingering at each nipple, almost sharp against his tongue. He could feel Brent's body heating up under his touch. The lower he kissed and licked, the rougher Brent groped him. Unable to take any more, Brent pulled him up so he could kiss his mouth.

"I need you," he said and rolled over to get on top. He pushed Nate down flat.

Nate felt Brent's mouth on his nipples briefly then down the trail of hair leading to his cock. Long licks covered the length of it. Brent kissed and licked the head thoroughly before he let the rest slide between his lips. He was a beautiful sight especially when he looked up at Nate with those soft brown eyes. There was nothing better in the world than coming while looking into Brent's eyes.

Now it was Nate's turn to enjoy him. He groped Brent's legs just to feel the hard muscles under his hands. Resting his head against his inner thigh, he licked Brent's balls. His arms reached up Brent's body to his chest. The nipples were hard against his fingertips as he worked them gently. His tongue massaged the underside of Brent's cock as Nate took him in slowly. Playful and loving at first, Nate's mouth turned relentless. As Nate sucked fiercely, Brent let out a growling moan. He came while gripping Nate's arms like he needed to hang on, anchor himself. Satisfied, Brent pressed himself against Nate's side. Kissing and stroking, they lay there with their arms around each other. When their eyes met, Brent asked, "Do I have to go?"

Nate smiled sleepily and held him tighter. He just couldn't let him go.

Around noon on Saturday, Nate watched his mother poking around in Brent's kitchen. As he stared at her, Nate thought about how Brent had told him that he never got to tell his parents he was gay. It took him too long to get up the courage, and then it was too late. Brent was sure they would have supported him, but he never got to experience what that felt like. Nate knew the feeling. When Nate told his mother he was gay, she took his face in her hands and gazed at him with a smile on her face. Then she hugged him.

"So you're OK with it?" Nate had asked though he was pretty sure of the answer since she was still hugging him.

"Of course I am. You're my baby. You're my little gay baby."

Nate's mother was checking out the huge oven. When she noticed him watching her, she said, "You could fit a whole person in there."

"Anyone in particular?" Nate asked her.

She made a face like he was the one being weird.

"I'm going to use this crazy kitchen and make these kids something good to eat," his mother vowed.

"Like the pigs in a blanket you gave me for my school lunch?" Nate remembered them fondly but didn't let on.

"They were delicious. You gobbled them up." That was true. His friends were always offering to trade him for them.

"Fine, you're a master chef," Nate told her.

"I know what's good, and I know what kids like to eat."

"You're going to make bread pizzas, aren't you?" Nate guessed. She claimed she invented them.

"Guilty as charged," she said unapologetically then went through and opened every cupboard in search of what she needed. "Nate, every single child in the whole world loves bread pizza." Then she exclaimed over the French bread she found, "Even better!"

Nate left her to it. God, it brought back memories. She made terrible, wonderful food that he would crave for the rest of his life.

In this nostalgic mood, Nate went to join Brent in the sunroom. It wasn't living up to its name right now. All the sun was gathered right outside its open doors. That's where the kids were playing with Ricky's toys. From what Nate could tell, a war was on. For now Ricky and Georgie were on the same side, and birds that came to drink from a small birdbath were the enemy.

"I take no responsibility for the crazy things my mom is doing in your kitchen. You invited her. This is on you," Nate said as he sat next to Brent.

"It's nice to have her here." Brent was looking at the kids as he

spoke.

"I kind of like her too. But wait till you see what she's going to feed you," Nate told him. His mother liked to put down cheese, then sauce, then more cheese. She wanted to make sure the bread didn't get soggy and that the sauce spilled all over. It was not going to be pretty. There would be a big mess to clean up, and Brent had given Lisi and Mona a paid day off.

"Whatever she makes, I'm going to like it," Brent predicted.

"You'll have to. I don't allow anyone to dis my mom's cooking. Except me."

Turning to smile at him, Brent looked a little sad and envious.

"Moms are nice," Brent said to explain himself.

"Dads are nice too," Nate told him while rubbing his broad back.

"Me?" Brent asked while pointing at himself.

"You have your moments," Nate said. He leaned over and kissed him lightly on the mouth. As he drew back, he was surprised that Brent didn't try to make more of it.

"I can be good," Brent claimed.

When Georgie came in to ask for a snack, Nate sent her to see what his mom was doing.

"Nate's mommy is making something!" Georgie announced happily to everyone when she came back.

"Anyone would think we never feed her," Brent said seeing her excitement.

"Yes, anyone would think that," Nate agreed. He gave Brent a dirty look for not cooking when he was so good at it.

After lunch, the five of them took the Bentley and went on a tour of Bridgegrove. As they passed the more notable houses, Brent shared the most shocking gossip about the residents. Then they visited an art gallery owned by a friend of his. Brent offered to buy Nate's mom a very expensive painting she admired. At first she was speechless, then she cupped his face, stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek.

"No, but thank you, honey," she told him.

Brent got tears in his eyes and quickly turned away. Good thing Georgie was demanding to color in one of the sketches on display.

"Serge, get my girl some crayons. She's going to double the value of that thing," Brent told his friend. Serge looked appropriately horrified.

For dinner, Brent took them all out, including John and Quin. They went to a beautiful French restaurant that his mother refused to enter at first because it was too fancy. Then she read the menu and saw the prices, and she tried to leave. Brent put Georgie in her lap so she couldn't escape.

"You're in charge of her, and vice versa," he told Georgie and Nate's mom.

They did keep each other occupied as Nate's mom tried to make her eat properly. Georgie was as well behaved as Nate had ever seen her. She did try to drink from his mother's wine glass and then tipped it over.

"You'll get us all arrested, you little criminal," Nate's mom told her. She didn't care that the sleeve of her dress got hit with the red wine. She just rolled it up. Brent promised her a shopping trip anyway.

His mom must have made a good impression because when Nate was tucking Georgie into bed, she asked, "Can we call her grandma?"

Nate was surprised.

"Pam's mom let us call her abuelita. That means little grandma," Ricky explained. He was standing at the ready with a book. He had promised Georgie that he would finish reading a story he started earlier.

"Umm. Let's just call my mom Sarah for now," Nate told them since he didn't know how she would feel about being called grandma or even little grandma.

Ricky sat on the edge of Georgie's bed and finished the story. It was kind of funny to see one kid reading a bedtime story to another.

"It was good," Georgie said when he was done reading and explaining. She was close to falling asleep but not quite there.

Brent came in and kissed Georgie on the nose as she stretched her arms up for a hug. He left her to Nate. Taking Ricky's hand, Brent walked him to his bedroom.

"You want me to read to you? Or you want to read to me?" Brent asked him as they left.

"Am I supposed to go to sleep or you?" Ricky asked.

"We'll flip a coin," Brent decided.

After he finished reading to Ricky, Brent was happy to find Nate waiting for him in his room. He was sitting on the edge of Brent's bed. Brent stared at him. He looked just right in Brent's bedroom, like the room was built around him. Maybe Brent and his whole life were custom built and then stood ready and waiting for Nate to appear and take possession of them. That's how it seemed to Brent anyway. Even Nate's mom fit in just right.

Brent got on the bed behind him. He pulled Nate down so he was resting his head on Brent's lap.

"Your mom is great," Brent said, but Nate must have seen the sad look in his eyes.

"She reminds you of your parents," he said.

She did, but it was more than that.

"My mom couldn't cook worth a damn," Brent said to try and make light of it. He ran his hand over Nate's very short hair.

"My mom can't cook either. You saw what she made," Nate reminded him.

Brent smiled. He had seen how Nate ate that French bread pizza. It probably took him right back to his childhood. Having Nate's mom there did that for Brent too. He decided to admit it.

"She reminds me of that feeling from when I was a kid, of being home and being taken care of. I wish I could do that for Ricky and Georgie."

"You do," Nate said, but Brent knew he didn't do enough. He brushed his fingers over the side of Nate's face, enjoying the rough feel of stubble.

"I wish that was true," Brent said. "But it was only a few years ago that I couldn't even take care of myself. Now I have two kids to think of."

"And you are taking care of them," Nate insisted.

"Not really. I have you and Quin and John. I couldn't do it if I was alone." It scared him to even think of the kids depending only on him.

Nate turned his head in Brent's lap to look at him more fully as he spoke.

"But you aren't alone. Everyone needs help. You know I used to take care of my cousins. That was me helping out my aunt. And after my father died, my aunt was still in college then, she left school for a little while to stay with me and Mom. Everyone needs someone to back them up."

Brent liked that idea, everyone helping each other, everyone leaning on everyone else so that no one was alone.

"I guess it's not so bad if you put it like that," Brent said.

"You're a good guy and a good dad no matter how hard you try to hide it," Nate said to him. "You're just stuck with all this guilt over how you handled yourself when your parents died and how much you gained by marrying Greta." Moving up, Nate shifted so that he was resting against Brent's chest. He pulled Brent's arms around him. He was quiet as he rubbed Brent's arms locked across his chest, squeezing him. Holding him felt so good to Brent even as he was reminded of bad times.

"I married for money. And if I hadn't, God knows where I would be now," Brent said, but he wasn't asking for sympathy from someone who had two jobs and went to school at the same time.

"At least you didn't go cheap."

"I did have worse offers. Then Greta came along and gave me my whole life, just handed it to me, everything I have now." It seemed

impossible to Brent that everything he had was really his, especially the kids. And now Nate.

"Then don't waste it. Enjoy it. Enjoy your kids," Nate urged him. "You struck a good bargain, don't kick yourself over that. Greta found a great dad for her kids. That was probably what mattered most to her. You have the kids, and they have you. Everybody wins."

Brent kissed Nate's temple, but he couldn't agree.

"Good dads aren't afraid of their own kids."

Nate turned and looked at him.

"Of course they are. Look at Georgie. Anyone in their right mind would be afraid of her. And if you weren't here to back me up, I would be scared out of my mind too," Nate told him and entwined their fingers together.

"No, you wouldn't," Brent said without a doubt.

"I would just do a better job of faking it," Nate said and locked his eyes on Brent's.

Brent couldn't imagine Nate being scared. He looked down at him too long in admiration, and his thoughts took a different turn.

"You are so attractive when you're being modest," Brent told him leaning closer as Nate tilted his face toward him. "And when you're being confident. Even when you sleep with your mouth open." As he spoke Brent kissed Nate's jaw, his earlobe, his neck.

"I don't do that," Nate claimed as he sat up and started to unbutton the shirt he had worn to dinner.

"I'll gather some photographic evidence tonight," Brent said as he worked Nate's shirt off his shoulders.

"Don't take pictures of me while I'm sleeping. That's creepy." Nate unbuttoned Brent's shirt, but sneaked his hands in to feel his chest before he was done.

"But you are sleeping over, right?" Brent said. He was worried that he would only get a quickie before Nate sneaked back to his own room.

"Give me a good enough workout, and I'll be too tired to go to my own room." Nate unzipped Brent's pants and did what he liked to do. He pushed his hand in past the zipper to rub his cock through his boxers. It was a huge turn-on when Nate did it while staring into his eyes. It made Brent feel like he was being seduced.

"Consider it done," Brent said between deep breaths. With his desire building like this, Brent felt like it might consume them both and still never burn out.

Nate was on top. Brent was on his back, ready for him. The first, delicious pressure of Nate's cock at his hole made him gasp. With Nate's name on his lips, he throbbed for more. His beating heart was loud in his ears as he felt every inch of Nate's rock hard cock growing

thicker and harder as he squeezed him. Then Nate's amazing cock was inside him, filling him. Striking deep, Nate fucked him in powerful thrusts that shook his bones. Brent was tight around him, loving him as he moved in and out. Their bodies were like steel, working together almost violently to make each other come. Sweat drenched and exhausted, they kissed slowly with tongues entwined.

They had fallen asleep together, but not long after, Brent woke up to the sound of Nate's even breathing. To hear him and to feel him in his arms, body heavy with sleep, gave Brent a feeling of peace and trust. He wanted to hold on to that feeling at any cost. Brent had never strived to be taken seriously. So now that he needed Nate to recognize how deep his feelings for him were, he wasn't sure he knew how to convince him. But then Nate never showed any signs of doubting him. He never looked through him or dismissed him like countless other people did, especially after his parents died.

A hole was left in Brent's heart when he finally had to accept that his parents were really gone. He would never hear his father laugh at something his mother said or did. His father would never hug him suddenly, for no reason other than because he was his dad. His mother would never mess up his hair because she was in a good mood. She would never sneak a cigarette and then blatantly deny it in a way that now reminded him of Georgie.

Brent had to leave all of that behind, go into the world alone. He couldn't forget the fear or the taste of his own desperation. Every day more doors were closing in his face. One by one, his friends had decided that he was too different from them now, that he didn't belong. He wasn't one of them any more. It was like he had fallen into a deep hole and no matter how much he yelled for help, no one could hear him. The ground under him was always sinking. Soon he would be swallowed up. Of course he took the first hand that was offered to him. At that time, his marriage to Greta seemed like an honest bargain. But as he made a life with her, Brent sometimes had a feeling that if he turned around, he would see his parents, and they would be looking at him with disappointment.

Brent turned his head on the pillow and looked at Nate in the dim light. He was sleeping with his mouth open.

"Click," Brent whispered while he pretended to take a picture.

Brent imagined if his parents could see him with Nate. Not now. When they were both dressed and decent. He closed his eyes and pictured it. He and Nate weren't dressed casually. They wore suits. They were standing together, but a minute ago Brent's parents had walked him down the isle. Now they were beaming at him proudly. So this must be a wedding. Nate's mom was there with Nate's father. He

looked kind of like Nate. Brent would have to ask Nate to show him a picture of his dad. Brent and Nate turned to each other. As he gazed at Nate, Brent realized that they were naked and everyone else was gone. He must have skipped to their honeymoon. Brent wasn't sure any more if this was a fantasy or a dream. It didn't matter. Nate was in his arms.

As Nate woke up, his closed eyelids were flooded with morning light. He was warm and content. Then he felt Brent's lips brushing against his chin, his neck, his shoulder. Brent's stubble grazed him lightly. Unconsciously, Nate rose toward his touch. Brent answered his need with a deep kiss. Their bodies were grinding against one another. Nate took hold of Brent's ass, squeezed and massaged it as Brent moaned. They continued to grind against one another until they came.

It was Sunday, the last day of his mom's visit. Through the open French doors of the sunroom, Nate saw his mom was with Brent. She was telling him to plant more flowers.

"You could have roses stretching as far as the eye could see," she said.

"I'll have some roses planted just for you," Brent promised her. Seeing Nate, he said, "I'm kidnapping your mom and taking her shopping."

"Oh, no. You can't," Nate's mom protested and she meant it.

"I owe you a dress. And if you spend any more time with Georgie, I'll owe you a whole wardrobe," Brent told her.

Knowing that if she went shopping where Brent planned to take her, his mom would only faint at every price tag she saw, Nate proposed a trip to a regular mall. Brent objected, but he was outvoted.

They had to drive well out of Bridgegrove to find a normal mall, but his mother was more at ease there than she would have been where rich people shop and salespeople look like they stepped off the pages of fashion magazines. It was more fun for the kids too. They could poke around more freely. Nate's mother insisted on buying them each a toy, which stopped Brent from buying them the whole toy store and making her gift less special. He did try to buy up the whole bookstore for Ricky.

"You can only have as many books as you can carry," Nate told Ricky. When Brent tried to overrule him, Nate reminded him that he made him the disciplinarian.

Ricky set aside some books he had picked out but couldn't manage by himself, and Georgie picked them up. She clutched them and looked up at Nate defiantly.

"Don't act so brave," Nate told her. "You aren't breaking any rules."

She was still a little hero to Brent. He laughed and kissed both kids leaving Nate to enjoy his role as the bad guy.

Nate was looking at them fondly when he saw his mom watching him. She came over and gave him a hug while they waited for Brent and the kids to get checked out.

"As an overprotective mother, I would warn you to be careful and not get too attached, but it's too late, isn't it?" his mom whispered to Nate.

"Yes, it is," he admitted.

"Well, you have good taste, honey. As ready-made families go, that's a good one," she said.

Nate smiled at her. He was so glad she liked them. And she was right. Very quickly and without noticing, Nate had passed the point of no return. Now he would never be happy without Brent, and he couldn't imagine leaving the kids. They had run off with his heart. And he didn't even want it back. He just wanted to be with them forever to watch them grow up. He wanted to see them take on the world and win. His heart was set on them, the whole bunch. They would be his life, his family. He was sure of it.

Since Nate's mom would be leaving that evening, Brent decided that they should give her a sendoff once they got back home. He recruited John to help him set up the food and drinks. Quin and Nate were in charge of the music. The controls were behind a hidden panel in the big, formal sitting room that hardly ever got used. Sitting on either side of Nate's mom on the sofa, the kids showed her family pictures from a big album.

"I have my dad's hair and his eyes too. Georgie has Mom's eyes and Brent's hair but darker," Ricky was explaining to Nate's mother, with the aid of some photos.

"You call him Brent, not Dad?" she said.

"He isn't really my dad," Ricky told her.

"Of course he is. I know a dad when I see one. He's definitely your dad," she said with an equal measure of offhandedness and certainty that Nate knew well.

Ricky didn't argue with her. Nate wondered if hearing one more person tell him what he already knew would bring Ricky closer to saying the word "Dad." It would make Brent so happy, but Nate wanted it for both of them. It would do Ricky good too. Nate remembered that after his father died, hearing another kid call out Dad or Daddy would break his heart all over again. He was sure that in Ricky's case, if the word was said, two hearts would get unbroken.

Quin and Nate fiddled with the controls until dance music was coming from every hidden speaker in the house.

"Watch out. I'm going to embarrass you so much," Nate's mom told him as Georgie pulled her up for a dance. That was her way of saying that she was going to dance her heart out.

"Go crazy, Mom," Nate told her.

She had nothing to worry about. She was a good dancer. Georgie's dancing was a lot like her kung fu, arms and legs flailing everywhere. When Brent showed up, he quickly set down a tray of food.

"Cutting in," he told Georgie.

She tried to fight him.

"No cutting! No cutting!" she yelled.

Nate picked her up and spun her around. Of course she wanted him to do it again and again. Ricky danced with Quin and John. After dancing with Nate's mom, Brent danced with everyone in turn until he was dancing with Nate.

With his arm around Brent's back, holding his hand, and gazing into his eyes, Nate felt just right.

"You done switching partners?" Nate asked him, feeling Brent's arms tighten around him at the question.

"Forever," Brent said while his eyes challenged Nate to take him seriously if he dared.

"I'll hold you to that," Nate told him and smiled. Happy to hear it, Brent smiled too.

They danced all over the house, down the hallways, in the foyer and outside around the fountain with the colored lights. Seeing that it was dark out reminded Nate's mom that she had to go. She excused herself to go pack, and Nate went with her. Georgie found them and saw what was happening.

"We are dancing," Georgie protested and tried to pull Nate's mom away from her packing.

"No. I have work tomorrow. I'm leaving, honey. I'm going home," his mom told her.

"Already?" Georgie said, getting a little teary eyed. She then turned to Nate and said, "I miss her."

"So soon?" Nate said and picked her up. Then he admitted, "I miss her too."

Nate's mom came over to them and squeezed their faces in her hands.

"No sad faces," she told them.

When they got to the garage, Nate let his mom pick which car they would take.

"I'm taking the bus," she said at the sight of all those cars. Then she picked the Thunderbird.

"Bye, bye, Nate's mommy!" Georgie called out and waved as they left.

Then everyone yelled out, "Bye, bye, Nate's mommy!" and Nate's mom blew kisses at them.

After Nate and his mom left, Brent lingered outside enjoying the brisk, night air. John stopped next to him while the kids followed Quin inside. All evening, Brent had tried to get John to drink, but he only had one glass of wine. John was a much better dancer after half a bottle or so.

"The kids liked her a lot, didn't they?" John said. They were also very fond of Quin's mother and even his grandmother. John probably thought it was because they didn't have any grandparents of their own.

"Of course they liked her," Brent said. "She's like Nate. She makes you feel safe and good."

John gave him a harsh look.

"I'm sorry I brought it up," John said, exasperated. "Not everything is an excuse to moon over Nate."

"I don't need an excuse," Brent said. His heart melted at the thought of Nate. But he turned more serious as he added, "I need advice."

"Don't do whatever you're thinking of doing," John said like he didn't even need to hear him out.

"You're just selfish," Brent accused him. "Why should you and Quin be the only ones who get to be happy?"

"So this is about Nate." John rolled his eyes.

"Of course it's about Nate. He's all I can think about," Brent said. Then he asked, "Can that happen? Can the perfect guy just walk into your house, shake your hand, say 'Hi, I'm Nate Ralha. When can I move in?'"

"That's not how it happened," John corrected him.

"Don't be so literal."

"Anyway, Nate isn't perfect. Quin is perfect," John said while a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

"I mean perfect for me. And how is Nate not perfect? Name one thing that's not perfect about him," Brent said and stared him down.

"You said you needed advice," John reminded him.

"How do I make sure that he never ever leaves?"

John sighed, but he could tell Brent was sincere so he answered him seriously.

"Just be yourself. He'll stay or he'll go because he wants to."

"I can't see straight. I'm afraid I'll scare him away." Brent was so consumed by his feelings, he didn't know what was too much. He felt incomplete, off balance without Nate. But Nate wasn't like him. As a man who could stand on his own two feet, he might need more space than Brent.

"Nate doesn't scare that easy," John told him. "From what I've seen, he's at home here."

Brent was glad to have John confirm what he believed so he went a

step further.

"But does he look at me the way you look at Quin?" Brent asked.

"How do I look at Quin?" John said defensively.

"Like he's a cake and you want to lick off all the frosting," Brent told him.

John shook his head.

"Nate doesn't look at you that way. You look at him that way." In a mellower tone he added,. "He has his own way of looking at you."

When John smiled despite himself, Brent could tell that he was happy for him. That, more than anything he said, told Brent that he had found something real with Nate.

Chapter 22

Ricky was home after soccer practice, giving Georgie a lesson in the game. When they saw Quin practicing some martial arts moves, they abandoned the soccer game and went to join him. They practiced the moves along with Quin in a little clearing while Nate read on a nearby bench. For a while everything was quiet. Then Georgie started chasing Ricky for laughing at her when she fell over after an overenthusiastic kick. Quin laughed at her too so she went after him next. He showed her some blocking moves, and they went back to practicing. But a little later, Georgie screamed then she was crying. Quin was trying to soothe her as Nate went over. Still in his soccer uniform, Ricky stood by, looking dismayed. And no wonder, Georgie was crying over a dead bug.

"She was scared so I stepped on it. Now she's crying because I stepped on it," Ricky explained, sounding a little indignant.

"He killed it!" Georgie accused, crying.

"He thought you wanted him to," Nate explained to her.

"No! Ricky killed it!" Georgie insisted. She didn't seem to care that she was the reason.

"Get a grip, G. It's only a bug," Quin said, but this only made her cry harder. "Your job, your headache, man," Quin said to Nate. He threw his hands up and walked away.

Nate crouched down to Georgie's level, and she hung around his neck and whaled in his ear about the bug. As he cradled her, Nate came up with an idea.

"Georgie, why don't we give the bug a nice funeral with flowers and..."

"No," Ricky said.

But Georgie said, "Yes, with flowers!"

"OK," Nate told her. He looked a Ricky. It was obvious how much he didn't like the idea of the funeral. Nate told him, "You don't have to come. It's just so Georgie will feel better."

After Ricky left them to it, Nate set the squished bug on a leaf while he sent Georgie to pick flowers. After he gathered a few rocks and a likely looking twig, he let her choose a spot for the grave. Georgie set her flowers in front of it. Then she and Nate stood solemnly over the pile of pebbles with a twig sticking out of it.

"Now you're supposed to say nice things about the bug," Nate told her.

"No. It wasn't nice. It was icky," she said.

"Says the girl who was crying her eyes out over it. We still need to say something nice about it."

"It was icky," Georgie insisted.

"Fine. I'll do it. This bug ... had a lot of legs," Nate said.
"It did," Georgie agreed.
"Amen."

While making dinner, Brent faintly heard the commotion outside then he saw Ricky coming in, looking gloomy. He went into one sitting room then another one. Brent saw that he was looking for a better view out the window. Brent joined him.

"Hey Ricky, what are they doing?" Brent asked him. He could see Nate and Georgie getting busy.

"They're having a bug funeral," Ricky said. He looked like he didn't approve. "I killed the bug for Georgie, but now she hates me."

Brent ran his hand trough Ricky's hair to comfort him.

"Georgie will never hate you," Brent assured him. "You're her favorite person and the best big brother anybody ever had. She is just little, and she likes to make a fuss. Go out there, and you'll see."

Ricky didn't go. He watched the funeral from the window. Brent stood close to him. He put his arm around Ricky, and they watched the funeral together. After a while Ricky leaned against him. Brent never wanted to move.

*

When Greta died, Pam thought that Ricky should go to his mother's funeral, but Brent didn't want to put him through that. Knowing there would be too many people there, some of them hostile, Brent wanted to protect him from all that commotion. Brent remembered hugging Ricky right before he left for the cemetery. On such an occasion, with Ricky so sad in his arms, Brent felt like he was fully his father for the first time.

"Me and Georgie are your family. Remember that," Brent told him as he held him. He didn't want to let go. Ricky hadn't turned five yet, and he was already so subdued and serious. Georgie was the only one he smiled for in those days.

Brent took Ricky to visit his mother's grave later, when it was quiet and peaceful. He decided that Georgie would join them some other day. It was just him and Ricky. The day was brisk but clear and sunny. Brent had let Ricky choose the flowers that would make up the bouquet. Ricky held it in the car and carried it all the way until he set it down.

Ricky pointed to the grave and asked, "Is Mommy in there?"

Yes seemed like the wrong answer.

"No. She's in here," Brent told him and pointed to Ricky's heart.

Ricky looked down then back up at Brent.

"She's always with you because she loves you so much," Brent told him.

"Then what's here?" Ricky asked.

"This is where we leave flowers for her," Brent told him.

He was afraid Ricky might have more heartbreaking questions he couldn't answer, but Ricky turned back to the grave and looked at the flowers.

"If you have a special message for her, you can say it here. If you have something important to tell her," Brent said since Ricky was staring at the grave uncertainly. Ricky looked up at him.

"I want to say, 'I love you, Mommy,'" Ricky said. He waited for Brent to tell him it was OK. Then he added, "Georgie too."

He waved at the grave as they left, and Brent had to bite the inside of his lip so he wouldn't cry in front of his little boy.

*

That night, Nate heard Ricky crying out and got out of bed quickly. It had to be another nightmare, but this time Nate only heard him briefly, not like before. As he went to check on him, he wondered if Ricky might have gone back to sleep, or if he even woke up at all since it was so quiet again. He did wake up. Nate saw him leave his room. He assumed Ricky was going to see that Georgie was OK. Without noticing Nate, Ricky went to Brent's bedroom and not Georgie's. He went in without knocking, almost like he was sneaking in. Following him, Nate expected Ricky would wake up Brent, but he only looked at him for a long time. Nate realized that Ricky was looking in on Brent the same way he had looked in on Georgie, to make sure he was OK. Ricky was scared of losing him as well. Nate let him reassure himself that Brent was all right and just waited for him. He worried that maybe the bug funeral was the reason and felt guilty.

Nate had turned on one of the lights in the hall so he wouldn't startle Ricky. He still jumped a little when he saw that Nate was waiting for him.

"I saw you were awake. I thought you might like some company," Nate whispered to him. Nate offered him his hand, and they went down to the kitchen for a snack.

As they were eating half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich each, Nate told Ricky, "If you wake up at night and you want company, you can just go ahead and wake me or Brent. Or even both of us. Everybody likes a midnight snack."

Ricky tilted his head, surprised at this idea of waking up half the house in the middle of the night.

"I had a bad dream," he confessed and stared at the big bite marks in his half of the sandwich.

"I used to have them too when I was little. When you get older, nightmares don't look as real. But for now, you just do what you need to do until you are sure nothing bad is happening, and you can go back to sleep. Just remember, if you need backup, you can always wake me or Brent. We'll be happy to help you chase away the bad dreams."

After a thoughtful moment, Ricky nodded and took another big bite of his sandwich.

Next morning, Nate told Brent about it while the kids were sitting down to breakfast. Brent went over and picked up Ricky from his chair. He wrapped him up in a long hug.

"Nate told me you were very brave last night," Brent said.

"No," Ricky denied it modestly.

"Nate doesn't lie. You're my brave boy," Brent said to him, gave him a kiss and one final squeeze and set him down again.

Ricky looked up at him and tried not to smile, but Brent's praise made him happy.

Since Brent wasn't home that afternoon, Nate took the kids shopping after they came home from school. It was always weird to see the difference between an ordinary supermarket and the one in Bridgegrove. There was an upscale cafe by the deli. And of course, the bakery section was deadly. The florist area was like something out of his mother's dreams. The central isles curved around columns that displayed some of the choicier items. The extra windows and skylights took away from the effect of the fluorescent lighting. But in the end, most of the isles were stocked with food you could buy anywhere.

Nate gave the word no a good workout all the way to the register and beyond. He was now saying it whether Georgie asked for anything or not. Ricky had asked for a few things too. As Nate gave the kids each one bag to carry, he noticed a guy approaching them. He had watery blue eyes and an ingratiating smile pasted on his face. Nate wondered if he was going to try to sell him something. If he was going to hit on him, he was out of his mind and out of his league.

"We have to go now. We have to go," Ricky insisted and pulled Nate and Georgie away from the man just as he stepped closer.

Nate gave the man a hard look then let Ricky drag him away.

When they got home, Brent was already there. First Nate had the kids help with putting away the groceries. After they ran off, he told Brent about the guy.

"Pasty guy in an expensive suit. Blue eyes, sandy, thinning hair, medium height. Not worth a first look, much less a second one."

Brent didn't like the sound of him either.

"That could be anyone from around here. But my bet is Marshal Davis. He used to be in business with Greta, but when her fortunes rose, his fell. She might have had something to do with that. He had a thing for Greta, but she did not have a thing for him. His pursuit of her was borderline stalking. She had the kind of money he could only hope to have. But she didn't want him anywhere near her. He had a small stake in some business deal with Greta until she bought him out, kind of roughly. She didn't mess around. He ended up hating her, but now that she's dead, he hates me more. Thinks I turned her against him, ruined his chance with her when he never had one," Brent explained.

"Ricky said we had to leave when this guy approached us."

Brent looked surprised.

"How much does he know about this?" Nate wanted to know.

"He shouldn't know anything. He's never had any contact with Davis. Greta would never have allowed that," Brent said with a frown.

"Ricky seemed to recognize him, and he knew he was bad news."

The two of them went to find Ricky to see what he knew. Ricky was sitting on the floor of the library, but he wasn't reading. He had set up an Ariel doll and his action figures around her as if they were guarding her. When a tyrannosaurus rex growled and tried to attack, he was beaten back without mercy.

Brent and Nate sat with Ricky on the couch so they could talk.

"Your dad and I wanted to ask how you knew that guy from today. The one you saw when you told me we had to leave," Nate said to him.

"He is a bad man," Ricky said straight away.

"How do you know?" Brent asked.

"It was a long time ago. When I was at Bjorn's house. The man was talking to Bjorn's mom. And then when she wasn't looking, he came over where me and Bjorn were playing. He said, 'Shhh.'" Ricky put a finger to his lips. "He tried to give me a paper. He said it had a phone number. He said you were hurting me."

"Hurting you?" Brent asked.

Ricky took a breath and explained.

"He said to call the number and say you hurt me, and it would make you go away. He said he was a friend of Mommy's, and it was what Mommy wanted. But that's not true! Mommy wanted you to take care of me and Georgie. She told me!" The more he talked about it, the madder Ricky got. But it was clear that Ricky wasn't just mad. He had been scared by Davis's words.

Brent kneeled in front of Ricky and took his hands.

"No one can take me away," Brent assured him. "That man is just a stinky little weasel. You don't need to worry about him."

"If he tries to talk to us again, I'll kick him," Ricky threatened.

"You don't need to kick anyone. Your dad and I are here to deal with guys like him," Nate told him.

"He can't hurt us," Brent said while looking into Ricky's eyes.

Ricky gave him one of his patented frowns, but he couldn't hide that he was reassured by what Brent said. Brent kissed his face a bunch of times, and that sent him running off in embarrassment.

"How long ago was that?" Nate asked once they were alone.

"Bjorn and his mom went back to Norway more than a year ago."

"What are you going to do about this guy?" Nate asked Brent.

"I'll sick the lawyers on him to make sure he stays away. That's what they are there for." Brent outlined his strategy to Nate. "Davis needs to maintain a certain kind of reputation in Bridgegrove so he can do business here. He is always looking for investors for one of his ventures. He won't risk having a restraining order taken out against him for trying to approach two young children. But if we push him too

far, he might overreact. We want him cowed not desperate."

Nate was a little impressed so Brent had to set him straight.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm just repeating what Greta said when we first discussed his rumor mongering. He was saying some stuff about me. We were worried that his lies might reach the kids, well, Ricky anyway. But Greta knew how to muzzle him. Unfortunately he wasn't the only one. But while the others got bored, he didn't. He believes he had a foothold with Greta until I came along, that he almost had it made. He feels cheated so he is carrying a grudge."

"What did he want with us?" Nate asked.

"Maybe to befriend you, bribe you, get you to spill some dirt he could use. He tried the same thing with Pam. We threatened him with a restraining order then too, and he never went near her again."

"Here's my next question," Nate said. "If I happen to see this guy again, how am I supposed to not beat the living shit out of him?"

Brent thought about this for a minute.

"First, you can't afford to set that kind of example for Ricky. Though if you did, Ricky would love you even more than he does now. And beating the shit out of Davis would involve physical contact with this guy, not to mention jail time. Does either of those things sound good to you?" Brent asked.

"Jail isn't like in porn movies, is it?"

"I'm guessing no."

"Then I'll keep a lid on it," Nate promised. He was kind of impressed that Brent was being so sensible.

Nate had gone to class leaving Brent to put the kids to bed. Already in their pajamas, with teeth brushed, the kids were both in Ricky's room. Lying at the foot of his bed, Ricky was propped up on his elbows with a book in front of him. Georgie was turning the lights off and on while Ricky was trying to read.

"Having fun, Georgie?" Brent asked.

"Daddy!" she said playfully and tried to run away.

Brent caught her and gave her a big kiss. He put her to bed first then went back to find Ricky still reading. Seeing that it was his bedtime, Ricky flipped over and got under the covers without being told. Brent picked up his book. Ricky showed him where he left off.

"Do you want me to read what it says or make something up?" Brent asked him.

"Read what it says," Ricky said. He did consider it for a little bit before he answered so his answer didn't hurt Brent's ego too badly.

"OK. Just this once," Brent said.

Despite the unpleasantness with Davis, Brent had a good feeling. He

had put his kids to bed, and now he was waiting for Nate to come home so he could seduce him. Everything felt right in his life. His only real worry was that it wouldn't last. But there was something about Nate that nearly obliterated that fear. He was steady and grounded, and sexy, and almost home.

Sitting in class, Nate had felt like time passed too slowly. Now he smiled as he came home. As soon as he saw Brent waiting for him in the loft and kissed him, he had to bitch about him.

"Damn it, Brent. I missed half of what Franklin was saying in class because I was thinking about you."

"You say the nicest things," Brent said right before he kissed him again.

As they went down the hall toward their bedrooms, Nate stretched his back, feeling both pain and relief as he did so.

"You're all stiff again, and not in a good way," Brent noticed.

"I spent too much time bent over earlier today, looking at stuff through a magnifying glass. I was sifting through a box that Professor Pullman marked as questionable. If he couldn't be sure if that stuff was genuine, I don't have a chance in hell. They need to be looked at by an expert. Plus I found this one request for supplies that's practically illegible already. And that thing is genuine. It can't wait. I asked Professor Franklin to put me in touch with someone who could preserve it. Sitting in class for hours, thinking about you didn't help my back."

"You need some stress relief," Brent said as he pulled him toward his bedroom.

"I think I'll just get some sleep," Nate said. He liked his offer, but he wasn't sure if he could do him justice.

"Just let me give you a massage," Brent implored.

"That's OK," Nate said since he would probably just fall asleep on him like the last time.

"Are you refusing?" Now Brent looked disappointed.

"OK, then. I could use it."

Now Brent looked happy.

"Stop being so sweet, or I'm going to fall in love with you," Nate warned him as he pulled off his t-shirt and threw himself on Brent's bed face down.

"I dare you to."

Brent climbed up on the bed to kiss his shoulder and down his back. He straddled him and started working his back with his strong hands. After kneading his muscles for a while, Brent slid his hands up to Nate's shoulders. He massaged until Nate felt good again. Leaning down, Brent licked the edge of his ear making him squirm. He must

have noticed that Nate's ears were sensitive and now used it against him. While kissing his neck, Brent drew his hand down Nate's back to his ass. His grip was firm as he groped Nate over his jeans, but Brent's kisses only skimmed his back. Nate was already aroused from the massage. He was too far gone for teasing.

"Hey, get serious," he told Brent.

"You are impatient," Brent said as he turned him over so he could get at his fly.

"Your fault," Nate said and dragged Brent down to him for a kiss. Brent returned his kiss hard and deep. Nate felt like he might drive him right through the mattress. He slipped his hand over Brent's ass feeling the curve and the muscle. Gripping him lower, he parted his legs. Brent sat up suddenly and grinned at Nate. He pulled both their cocks free and joined them in both his fists. Pumping them together, he also rocked his hips so his cock slid over Nate's. It was a wonderful sensation, and Brent was always a beautiful sight. The controlled motion of his hard body was mesmerizing. When Nate started moving too, Brent made him lie still. That was a torture but it paid off.

After they came and Brent cleaned him up, Nate fought to keep his eyes open.

"Close your eyes, there's nothing to see here," Brent told him and kissed his eyelids.

"There's you," Nate told him.

"I'll always be here," Brent promised.

Chapter 24

Friday afternoon, Brent and Nate were lounging by the pool. Brent had bought a bunch of rubber duckies and filled the pool with them. Georgie and Ricky were swimming among them. While Nate got it all on video, Brent walked away to take a phone call. After he got off the phone, Brent came to talk to Nate.

"Patricia Owens invited us to go horseback riding tomorrow. She and her husband are old friends of the family. Their granddaughters are visiting, and they are just a little bit older than Ricky and Georgie," Brent told Nate and watched him make a face. "You've never been on a horse," Brent guessed correctly.

"I'm invited?" Nate asked him.

"Of course," Brent said. He tried to sound casual, but Nate wasn't fooled.

"Did you tell them you were bagging your hot manny?" Nate asked.

"Not in so many words. But I did tell them you weren't just the manny." To convince him further, Brent said, "You can't leave me outnumbered. When it comes to large, easily startled animals that like to kick, the preferred ratio is one adult for every child. And several for Georgie."

"You sold me. Kind of." To Nate, the whole thing sounded like a recipe for disaster, especially that whole thing about kicking.

Next day, Nate was surprised to see that Brent and the kids were all decked out western style. They were all wearing cowboy boots, and Brent carried a pair for Nate.

"Based on some close scrutiny of your measurements, I think these will fit you," Brent said as he handed them over.

In front of the kids, Nate chose to ignore the more suggestive aspects of what Brent said. The boots were brown and they fit decently. They went well with Nate's plaid shirt and jeans. Brent wore jeans and a white shirt with snaps, and he looked gorgeous. The kids looked adorable in similar outfits but with the addition of fringed vests. Georgie's was red over a checkered pink and white shirt, with jeans and red boots. Ricky wore a more serious and manly brown vest with a denim shirt, jeans and brown boots like Nate's. Nate felt strange being part of a group that looked ready to go line dancing, but he decided to have fun with it.

"Where are your horse riding helmets?" Brent asked the kids.

They both shrugged.

After a fruitless search, Brent had to call Pam in Costa Rica to ask her where they were.

On the drive over, Brent filled in Nate about what he was in for.

"The Owens' horses are sweethearts. The Owens' grandkids ride them all the time. But someone will have to reign in Georgie. I don't think she understands the difference between a horse and a kitten. She's a nightmare around horses. Aren't you?" Brent asked her to confirm it.

"I want a horse," Georgie said.

"No," Brent said simply.

"Yes! I want a horse."

Nate decided to jump in.

"Horses are too big for a little kid like you."

"No, they're not. I want a horse."

After she said that several times, Nate asked her, "Do you want your dad to turn this car right around and head back home?"

"No. We have to go see the horses." She didn't seem to understand that this was a threat, and a time honored classic.

"Then zip it or no horses. Got that?" Nate told her.

She made a face but stayed quiet only for about two minutes.

"We could have a little horse," she said.

"A little horse is called a pony," Ricky lectured her.

"I know!" She leaned over to yell in his ear. Then she addressed the adults again. "We can have a pony!"

The Owens's sprawling, one story house was well outside of town. A beautiful, wide porch encircled it. Close to the house was a garden full of flowers and then the open fields all around. Mr. and Mrs. Owens and their two granddaughters came to meet them. Mr. Owens was thin and leathery. Mrs. Owens was blond and older than she seemed from a distance. Mrs. Owens welcomed them. Her voice was a little louder than necessary, but she was casual and friendly as she led them around and to the stables. When the horses were in sight, grazing in a small enclosure, Georgie pointed and yelled excitedly, "I see them! I see them! Look! Horses!" She acted like she had just discovered them and needed to point them out to everybody, even their owners. Then she pinched her nose as they walked by the stables.

"Did you forget that horses are stinky," Brent asked her.

Before the horses were brought out, Mrs. Owens reminded the kids how to behave around them. Nate listened too, for his own sake and so he could make sure the kids stayed safe. All the kids now wore their riding helmets. When the horses were brought out one by one, Brent held on to Georgie. Even if she heard what Mrs. Owens said, she wasn't going to obey in her overexcited state. After she calmed down a little, Brent went over the safety rules again with her and led her to one of the horses. She looked tiny standing next to a horse. It was a

little scary. Brent never let go of her hand, and Ricky never took his eyes off her. Then Mrs. Owens came up to them leading a brown horse.

"I think Ricky should try riding Brambles again," she said as she patted the horse's side. Turning to Ricky she said, "Nothing to worry about. He is as sweet as can be."

Ricky was frozen, standing next to that wall of muscle. He did pet the horse as instructed and fed him some treats, but from a bucket not his hand. When it was time to help Ricky climb into the saddle, Brent handed the very envious Georgie to Nate. As Brent picked up Ricky to put him on the horse, Nate could tell how nervous he was. Brent held on to him even after he was in the saddle. Surprised that he didn't take to it, Nate asked him, "Isn't it just like climbing a tree?"

Ricky shook his head. He was too scared to speak.

"Trees don't move," Brent told Nate.

Mrs. Owens led the horse while Brent walked alongside and steadied Ricky. After a ride that lasted only a few minutes, Ricky was visibly relieved when it was over and he was back on solid ground.

"You did good," Nate told him.

Georgie wanted a turn, but she couldn't be trusted on a horse. Mrs. Owens held on to Brambles while her granddaughters took charge of Georgie.

"Dibs on Licorice," Brent said of a black horse that was bigger than the one Ricky had ridden. Mr. Owens led him to Brent. He patted the horse and said some endearments to him before he climbed into the saddle. Brent sure knew how to get on a horse. He looked magnificent up there. Ricky looked impressed too. Brent smiled at him.

"Climb on here with me," Brent urged Ricky. "Hurry before Georgie beats you to it."

Ricky looked over at Georgie to make sure she was still busy with Mrs. Owens and her granddaughters. They seemed to know how to handle her. Making sure Ricky's helmet was still strapped on securely, Nate lifted him to sit in front of Brent. Putting one arm around him, Brent held the reigns with the other. Now that he felt safe, Ricky looked more relaxed, and he could enjoy being on a horse. He even smiled as excitement overcame any lingering fear. Of course Georgie saw what was happening. Her eyes almost popped out when she saw she was missing out. Before she could demand a turn, Nate picked her up.

"Let Ricky have some fun," Nate said. He didn't trust her to be generous for long so he took her to look at a grayish white horse Mr. Owens had brought to his granddaughters. Out of the corner of his eye, Nate saw Brent and Ricky riding off. When they got back, Ricky was grinning.

"We went fast!" he said as Nate helped him climb down.

"Me next, me next. I want to go fast!" Georgie jumped up and down.

"OK. Climb up," Brent told her then he reached out his hand like she was supposed to do it by herself.

She looked at Nate.

"Go ahead. Jump up there," Nate told her.

"It's too far," she said, but she jumped anyway.

That alone was worth Nate's help. He handed her up to Brent. In the saddle, she was fearless.

"Let's go fast!" she said.

As they rode off, Nate turned to Ricky. He was still exhilarated and didn't look worried about Georgie. Maybe he trusted Brent to keep her safe.

"They won't go as fast as you guys did," Nate reassured him anyway.

Nate wasn't eager to ride, but he got his turn when Brent got back. As Nate carefully got on that grayish white horse, Georgie wanted to ride with him. There was no way. Nate could hardly handle himself in the saddle much less a crazy little kid like Georgie. It was strange to feel the shifting of the powerful animal underneath him. After a few slow turns, Nate picked up speed and felt some of what the animal was capable of. He didn't go far or fast. When he went back and dismounted, Brent said, "Just like driving a sports car."

"Nothing like driving a sports car," Nate told him. Though at times Brent's cars seemed alive with power, the horse was truly, and undeniably alive. Since Nate kept petting the horse, Mr. Owens showed him what to do to cool him down, though Nate hadn't exactly given him a major workout. Nate brushed down the horse until Mr. Owens told him to stop or he would spoil him.

On the ride home, Georgie didn't stop asking for a horse for even one minute. She seemed to think that a hundred no's could be followed by a yes. Nate understood the appeal a lot better now. And Brent on a horse was a sight he wouldn't soon forget.

After an early dinner, Brent and Nate were sitting at the outside table, which was nestled among the trees across from the kitchen. The wind was cool. The air was ruddy but smelled green and fresh. Playing nearby, the kids filled the evening with noise.

"You really know how to ride," Nate said. Brent looked beautiful on a horse, like he was born to it.

"You mean...?" Brent asked leaning forward as if they were about to discuss something that shouldn't be overheard.

Nate leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"Horses. I'm talking about horses."

Brent leaned back too.

"My mom and dad took me riding all the time. My mom was crazy for horses just like Georgie."

Thinking about Georgie, Nate had to say, "That girl isn't afraid of anything."

"An occasional bug maybe," Brent said.

On the other hand, Ricky was only able to enjoy himself when Brent held him.

"I think that Ricky is afraid of big, unpredictable things. Horses, you," Nate joked.

"Those are perfectly nice horses. They haven't gone wild and run off with anyone in weeks. And neither have I, by the way," Brent said wanting credit for being good and maybe a treat.

"You must be saving yourself for something good," Nate told him.

"Am I?" Brent asked like he actually didn't know for sure how Nate felt about him. Nate again saw that vulnerability in him.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's just us," Nate told him.

Brent smiled and looked really happy to hear that. Seeing him like that made Nate wish he had said more.

As the sunset colored the air and the breeze cooled it, Brent listened to the kids shouting and laughing. Sitting there with Nate, Brent had been wondering how many happy days could stack up one after another. And now Nate confirmed that it was just the two of them. That was another way of saying they were a couple. Life was too good. It kind of scared him. It reminded him of the fast, frightened beating of Ricky's heart right under his hand when he put him in the saddle by himself. That's why he didn't let go of him. Just like when they went riding before, Ricky couldn't relax into it. Being on a horse was nothing like being up a tree. Trees can't throw a little boy off, or run off with him at a gallop. Maybe it was the unpredictability of a big, fast moving thing with a will of its own that scared him, just like Nate said. Riding with Brent had worked out much better. Ricky was happy and so was Brent. Maybe that meant that Brent wasn't some big, unpredictable animal. He could make Ricky feel safe and put a big smile on his face. He could make Nate want to stay to be with them forever and complete their family.

As Nate was putting Georgie to bed, she was making a case that a horse could live with her in her room. Nate looked over at Brent who was waiting by the door holding his nose and saying, "Stinky! Remember?"

Georgie just said that they could give the horse a bubble bath. To get her to settle down, Brent told her a story about a little horse that grew big until he was bigger than a house so that a little girl who was

riding on his back could ride through the clouds. Then he grew even bigger so the little girl could ride through the stars. First they counted all the clouds. Then they counted all the stars. The two of them were still counting as Nate went to see if Ricky was ready for bed. When he was tucking him in, Nate noticed that he had something on his mind.

"You want to ask me something?"

"Yes. I heard Mrs. Owens talking to Mr. Owens, and she said I was a poor little rich boy just like my dad. What does it mean?" Ricky seemed to be asking if he was being insulted.

"She means that both you and Brent lost your parents. You know Brent's parents died, right?"

"Yeah. They were in a boat, and it turned over and that's very bad." Ricky was quiet for a while then he asked, "Did he get to say bye?"

"I don't think so."

Hearing that, Ricky looked both sad and thoughtful. When Brent came in to kiss him goodnight, Ricky held on to his hand. He didn't say anything, but the way he looked up at Brent made Nate both envious and proud of them as father and son.

These days, when Nate got home, Georgie would run up to him to greet him with a hug and a kiss and to ask if he brought her anything. Ricky was never so effusive or demanding, but he did often give Nate a smile when he returned from work. Being welcomed by the children he had come to love was a nice feeling, something to sweeten his day. Even as he worked, the sounds of their voices reached him from down the hall and made him smile. Only Brent was needed to complete the happy picture. They would spend the evening together, and after that Nate could look forward to a whole night with Brent in his arms.

While Nate was doing some research and daydreaming about Brent, John came into the library. He looked a little agitated.

"I just got a phone call from Dolores, Miss Pullman's housekeeper," John said when Nate couldn't place the name right away.

"Is Miss Pullman alright?"

"She is, but you might be out of a job. One of them anyway. Marshal Davis paid Miss Pullman a visit. He told her not to trust you. He claimed that you were looking for buyers for stolen Revolutionary War documents that likely came from her father's collection. And also that you were taking credit for Professor Pullman's work and passing it off as your own and possibly destroying Professor Pullman's original manuscripts to cover your tracks." John finally took a breath after saying all that.

"Fuck!" Nate said, livid. He stood up, but then just sat right back down. "Thanks for telling me. And thank Dolores too if I don't get the chance," Nate said.

John was obviously surprised at how quickly Nate cooled down from his initial anger at the news. He poked Nate's shoulder like he was checking if he was alive.

"You can't be this calm about it. Aren't you going over there to do damage control?" John asked him.

"No. I'll go over there tomorrow as usual and see what happens. Unless I get a phone call before then," Nate told him. He hoped he would at least get to make his case to Miss Pullman in person.

"This isn't just about Miss Pullman firing you. This could really hurt you. Your academic standing, your reputation..."

"What could hurt him?" Brent asked from the door.

"Davis is smearing his name with Miss Pullman. And Nate is just going to let Davis's lies stew until tomorrow," John tattled to Brent.

"She either believes in me or she doesn't," Nate told both of them.

They both looked way more upset than Nate, Brent in particular. He looked stricken.

"I'm sorry. I never thought he would go after you like this. I know

how important that job and your studies are to you," Brent said.

"I have this other job to fall back on. I'm moonlighting as a nanny," Nate said with a smile, but Brent only frowned deeper. Just as Nate was going to try and say something more reassuring, his phone rang. It was Miss Pullman. Maybe this wouldn't wait until tomorrow after all. As Nate answered the call, John pulled Brent away so he could fill him in on the details.

After talking to her for a few minutes, Nate said goodbye to Miss Pullman. He turned to find Brent and John waiting expectantly.

"You can put away your condolences," Nate told them. "Miss Pullman didn't believe a word of it."

Brent let out a huge sigh of relief, and John patted him on the back. Nate told them more.

"Dolores told her that she called John. She didn't want to go behind her back. So Miss Pullman called to reassure me of her complete faith in me. Apparently Davis claimed he was a good friend of an old friend of hers, but it turned out he didn't even know her. Miss Pullman listened patiently as he told lies about me. When he was done, she told him she would sue him for slander if he ever said another word about her, her father, or anyone in her employ – that would be me. Davis tried to backpedal his way out of it, apologizing, saying he might have made a mistake so he probably won't be repeating that story again."

"I am now officially in love with Miss Pullman," Brent said.

"Keep it in your pants," John told him. He looked like he was dying to play the wet blanket. "We can't let Davis..."

"I don't want you starting a war on my behalf," Nate said decisively. He could tell that John didn't think that the problem was solved with yet another threat of legal action.

Brent agreed with John.

"He came after you because of me," Brent said. "We tried threats of litigation already. We need to step it up."

"Don't forget your strategy of containment," Nate told him since Brent had a bloodthirsty look in his eyes. He seemed more aggressive now that Nate's reputation was under attack and not his own.

"We can stay with that strategy," John said. "But after this, I think we need to remind Davis of how much he stands to lose. He isn't Bridgegrove rich. He can't afford to live here. He only lurks around here looking for investors. He has good connections, but he's just a hungry rat in a maze full of cheese. We zap him to let him know he took the wrong turn, to keep his mind on the cheese and not get sidetracked by his obsession with Brent."

Nate gaped at John's analogy, but Brent was ready to pounce.

"How do we zap him?" Brent asked. He and John were obviously on

the same page.

"Harvey Colliers," John said. The name meant nothing to Nate, but Brent knew who he was.

"The Great Gay Godfather? He hates me. He made a pass at me right before I married Greta. He said he wanted to give me a pre-honeymoon. In case I didn't know what he meant, he stuck his middle finger in his mouth and moved one of his gaudy rings up and down on his fat finger with his teeth."

"Thanks for the imagery, Brent! I am now a eunuch!" John told him.

Though Nate agreed with John's disgusted reaction, he wanted to get back to the main subject.

"What can this guy do about Davis?" Nate asked John.

"He can do plenty. Harvey Colliers is a Bridgegrove institution with tons of money and even more influence. Overall Bridgegrove is pretty conservative, but in the end, money talks," John said.

"Harvey would rather side with Davis than me," Brent interjected. "When I rejected him, I didn't exactly say 'No, but thank you for the kind offer.' I was worried that Greta would find out I was gay and not bi so I overreacted a little. I insulted him. It was pretty bad. I wanted to make him stay away from me. He is not going to help us."

"Of all the stupid things! That's not a bridge you burn," John scolded him. His temper subsided quickly. "But you can put away your ego now, Brent. Not everything is about you. Colliers is going to hear that Davis was bothering Miss Pullman. She is an old friend of his late, beloved mother. She is like an honorary aunt to him or something. He won't bankrupt Davis over a stunt like that, but he will deliver the zap that we need. Davis has to back off. If he pisses off Harvey, he'll find a lot of doors closing in his face."

"And how will he hear about it?" Nate asked.

"Dolores will tell Florian. He's Colliers' manservant, masseur, whatever." John rolled his eyes.

"So he's like you," Brent teased him.

John only glared. After he left followed by some teasing from Brent, Nate asked, "Does John know everybody?"

"Yes. Or at least everyone who works for a living around here."

Nate looked out the library windows then slumped down in the chair behind his desk. Brent sat on the edge of it, facing him.

"I don't get this Davis guy. He wanted Greta for her money, but what does he hope to gain now?" Nate asked.

Brent didn't look like he knew, but he came up with some theories.

"Just venting his frustration? He has nothing to gain. That's why I was sure he would back off. That obviously didn't work. I'm sorry. I never expected him to make you a target. I wouldn't expect him to know..."

"Know what?" Nate asked when Brent trailed off.

"How important you are to me," Brent said grudgingly.

"Look at you coming on to me during a crisis," Nate said to him.

When Brent leaned down, Nate kissed him only briefly. He broke off the kiss and said, "Go make me dinner."

Quin and John stopped by for dinner. Brent pretended he hadn't invited them. He had just casually mentioned that he was making fennel roasted chicken, orzo and rice pilaf, molasses glazed snow peas, and that he had opened two bottles of wine to let them breathe. It was late by the time Nate stretched out on Brent's bed.

"So what do you want to do to me?" he asked, looking up at Brent as he peeled off his shirt revealing his perfect muscles.

"Everything."

"OK, let's do that," Nate mocked him. He sat up to take his own shirt off. Brent helped him then wrapped him up in his arms tightly.

"You are so fuckable," he told Nate as he pushed him back on the bed and kissed his face and neck.

"Is that what you want to do?" Nate asked him, wondering if he wanted to top.

"Yes, and everything else too. With you, nothing is enough."

"Try and remember that I have two jobs," Nate told him so he wouldn't overdo it.

"I'll be gentle and considerate, and you'll be incapacitated for a week."

"Brent?"

"I just want you so much."

Nate laughed at him and kissed him. Their kiss went deep and lasted until Brent pulled back.

"When I'm with you like this, I'm not sure if I'm asleep or awake. Are you really here?" he asked Nate.

"If I was a figment of your imagination, wouldn't I be taller?"

"No. You would be exactly as you are but in my bed 24/7." Brent managed to sound completely sincere. "If this is a dream, it's the best dream I ever had."

"Then I'm dreaming it too," Nate told him and they kissed again.

"Roll over, I'll give you a massage," Brent said and nudged him to turn.

"I don't really need a massage," Nate told him.

"Pretend you do. I'll be your hot masseur, and I'll seduce you," Brent proposed as he pulled his pants down his legs.

"Don't take too long," Nate told him. He was dying for Brent. Nate didn't know that he could want someone more the more he had him. That was because there was so much more to Brent than a perfect

body. His heart was so open to Nate.

To start, Brent ran his hands down his sides gently, seductively. Brent's touch was lighter than when he gave a real massage, and it ranged all over. He gave special attention to Nate's ass, making him both laugh and moan. He ran his hands up the back of Nate's thighs. He did it again moving further in, running his thumbs along his inner thigh and parting his legs. Nate groaned as he was repositioned. His cock had grown unbearably hard already. Brent's hands were incendiary. They moved provocatively, insolently over Nate's body. Brent parted his ass and thumbed his hole, making him shudder. Feeling Brent's mouth at his asshole, Nate gasped in surprise then laughed. Soon he was busy moaning as Brent's tongue licked and teased his hole. He said Brent's name several times before he realized he was doing it. When Brent stopped, Nate slammed his fist into the mattress.

"You're too good at that," Nate told him. "You're too good at everything."

"You inspire me," Brent said.

Nate could hear him handling the condom and lube. Every nerve in Nate's body tingled, ready, wanting Brent. He then felt the pressure of Brent's finger entering him, slick and easy then stopping as his ass squeezed around him. Another finger went in, and Nate pushed back into it. Seeing how eager he was, Brent added a third, making Nate moan. Dying for it, he reached to stroke Brent's cock. Brent only let him have a few strokes. He pressed down on Nate's back as he writhed. One hand was holding him steady, comforting him in his extreme need, while the other opened him up. Then Brent was directly behind him, his cock finally where Nate wanted it. Overwhelmed, Nate gasped and choked back every sound that threatened to burst out of him as Brent entered him. Brent made every inch pure pleasure for both of them. His body was hot against Nate's as he thrust all the way in. Their bodies united then parted. With one hand on Nate's shoulder, Brent fucked with long deep strokes. Nate felt a mindless, burning pleasure but also a strong, unbreakable connection to the one man he was meant to be with. It was a feeling of knowing Brent completely and being known by him. Mostly it was ecstasy rising higher and higher until he couldn't take it any more. The tightness and desperate need coursing through his whole body made Brent slam in harder and faster. All Nate could do was hang on and take it, welcome it as it brought him to orgasm. With Brent inside him, Nate felt like he would never stop coming. As Nate came in powerful streams, Brent followed. In that airless moment, they were truly one being filled with pleasure and love. Then they were smiling, nearly unconscious, collapsed in a tangle and content to stay that way.

Quin had been out of town for the last few days so Brent took the kids to school and picked them up. Nate could swear that the kids smiled more than ever, especially Ricky. It did them so much good to have their dad around.

Now that he was home, Ricky was sitting at a desk across from Nate's in the library, doing homework. He looked up at Nate thoughtfully a few times so Nate knew something was on his mind.

"You need help with anything?" Nate asked him.

"Are you going to leave too when you get married like Pam did?" Ricky asked.

"I don't have any plans to get married," he told Ricky, though the thought did make his heart skip a beat or two.

"Why do people have to get married anyway?" Ricky asked, sounding peevish.

Nate smiled at him and said, "They don't."

"Then why is everyone always getting married? Pam, my mommy and Brent, and Quin and John. And Georgie is always talking about marrying a prince."

"Georgie is a little too young. I don't think you need to worry about her. And Quin and John want to get married because they love each other," Nate said though this was the first he was hearing about it. He wondered if something he heard had made Ricky worry.

For now Ricky focused on Georgie letting Nate off the hook on the marriage question.

"Georgie always thinks she's a princess," Ricky complained. "She put a chickpea under her mattress, and she put all her tiaras on her head, and said she was a princess. She tried to make everyone kiss her hand, but only Brent did it."

"Did you read her The Princess and The Pea?" Nate asked.

"Yes."

"Then you only have yourself to blame," Nate told him with a wink.

"I know, but I have to read to her, or she'll sit on my book."

Ricky reading to Georgie made for a sweet sight. Georgie didn't listen attentively and she interrupted often. Nate knew that she didn't understand a lot of what Ricky read to her, but she still liked to listen to him. Every so often Ricky would stop reading to tell Georgie what was happening in the story as he understood it. After he was done, Ricky would retell the story in his own words, putting his own spin on it. He also had to answer a lot of why's.

Nate stopped by the office to get the scoop on this marriage talk. According to John, so far it was just talk. He and Quin hadn't made

any definite plans, but John had mentioned something to Pam on the phone. That might have been what Ricky overheard. John didn't want to admit it, but it was a sure thing, just the matter of setting the date.

"Brent will never get over it," Nate said.

"He brought it on himself," John claimed. "He pushed us together."

"That's not the version I heard," Nate reminded him. "From you."

John shrugged.

"I can't give him credit. You give Brent an inch..."

"Is that why you never...?" Nate asked.

"I wasn't interested."

"Riiight. What does Brent have going for him other than being gorgeous and rich?" Nate needled him.

"I'm not you," John said pointedly. Then he told him the story. "Brent was the first one who noticed that I had a thing for Quin. All of a sudden, Brent starts sending me and Quin out on all these errands together. We went everywhere, dropped things off, picked things up, and none of it needed to be done. It was getting ridiculous. I had to confess my feelings to Quin just to put a stop to all that nonsense."

"How did he react?"

"He was surprised." John said shyly. That must have been quite a moment for him.

"Why? He's insanely hot."

"He thought me and Brent had a thing because we're always bickering. Can you believe that?" John had the nerve to ask.

"Yes. Because I thought the same thing," Nate told him since he was so clueless.

"Unbelievable."

Nate was about to ask where Quin was when John had to deal with a phone call, and Nate heard Georgie yelling down the hall.

"Ahhh!" Georgie was yelling.

It was followed by Ricky yelling, "No, Georgie, you'll mess it up!"

Nate knew he had to go and referee whatever that was. Finding them in one of the bathrooms, Nate saw that Ricky was wrapping his sister in toilet paper. But what Georgie objected to was when Ricky tried to wrap her face too.

"What are you doing?" Nate asked him.

"She's a mummy," Ricky said.

"No!" Georgie said as Ricky kept trying to cover her whole head with toilet paper.

Nate showed him how to leave room for her face and cover the rest of her. Then he took pictures. The mummy smiled while Ricky made scary faces over her shoulder.

Hearing Brent as he came in and said hi, Georgie ran over to him.

"No! You have to walk like a mummy!" Ricky yelled as he chased her. Along the way he and Nate had to pick up all the toilet paper she dropped. "You're ruining it, Georgie!"

"I'm a mummy!" Georgie said to Brent as he swung her up.

"I'll have to take your word for that," Brent said since there was very little paper left to prove it.

"She was a mummy." Ricky pouted.

"We'll show him the pictures," Nate told him.

As Brent looked at the pictures, he had an idea. "We should get real bandages."

"Seriously?" Nate said. That kind of thing would only occur to Brent.

Brent pointed at Ricky's eager expression. "That look on my boy's face says yes."

"You're going to get bandages just so the kids can play mummy?"

"I'll make John do it."

"I bet he'll love that," Nate said.

But when he came over to them, John had something more serious on his mind. They sent the kids to play and went to the office to talk.

John looked gloomy as he shut the door.

"By involving Colliers, I might have made things worse not better," John said. "He saw right through our scheme, and now he demands an audience with Brent."

"A what?" Brent said, echoing what Nate was thinking.

"Colliers connected the dots from Miss Pullman to Nate to you," John said.

"Best laid plans of rats and men," Brent misquoted.

"Now he wants a private meeting with you," John told him.

"Is that all?" Brent said and sat on the edge of the desk.

"Why aren't you more worried?" John asked him.

"Because that's why I have you," Brent said blithely.

"And look what a mess I got you into," John said, feeling responsible.

"I'm not in a mess, and it's not because of you. I'll just meet with Harvey and make nice. No big deal."

"How nice?" John asked and narrowed his eyes at Brent.

"Just nice enough to get him on our side. Relax. He's just a guy, not Jabba the Hutt," Brent said to try to reassure him.

John grumbled and looked at Nate as a possible ally. But Nate didn't want to second-guess Brent. If he thought he could resolve his issues with this guy, Nate wasn't going to doubt him or stand in his way. He did worry that Brent was so determined to meet with Colliers because Nate had become a target for Davis. The main thing that kept Nate from worrying was that he was going to be right there when Brent met with this Harvey Colliers.

Sitting in the library, Nate was trying to read but not making much progress. Whenever he thought about Brent meeting some sleazy guy for his sake, Nate's concentration would go out the window. Then Ricky ran into the library with a book in his hand. Seeing Nate at his desk, he ran over to him, a little breathless.

"Nate, Nate, the Little Mermaid, she died. She turned into foam." Ricky opened the book and showed him the passage. It was a little more ambiguous than that, but essentially correct. "What if Georgie finds out?" Ricky asked worriedly.

He had a point. Georgie probably only knew the Disney story or some other sanitized version.

"We won't let her find out," Nate decided.

"We have to hide the book," Ricky said conspiratorially.

"The best place to hide a book is with other books." Nate looked around. "We'll put it on a really high shelf. Good plan?"

Ricky nodded.

"I'll put it up. You stand guard," Nate told him. As he climbed the ladder, he added, "If you ever have to tell the story to Georgie, just say that the Little Mermaid married the prince and lived happily ever after."

"Stupid prince. It's all his fault," Ricky said.

After the book was safely stashed on the top shelf, Ricky still hovered anxiously near Nate's desk. Nate prompted him to speak up.

"Are there a lot of them, a lot of stories with dying?" Ricky asked.

"Some. But not too many," Nate told him. He could tell that Ricky wasn't just worried about Georgie finding out and getting upset. He was upset too, and Nate wasn't sure how to reassure him.

"Let's talk to your dad," Nate said and took Ricky's hand.

They found Brent by the sound of his laugh. He was in the sunroom, sitting in one wicker armchair with his feet on the armrest of another one. When Nate saw that Brent was on the phone, he made a cutting motion. Brent ended his conversation without too much ceremony.

"What can I do for you guys?" he asked. He got his feet down and leaned forward. His focus was on Ricky.

"We found out that the Little Mermaid dies," Nate told him.

"This is going to be the Little Match Girl all over again," Brent said.

"We're not telling Georgie," Nate informed him. Ricky shook his head to confirm it.

"So it's a conspiracy. Are we forming a secret society?"

"It's not a joke," Ricky told him.

"You know I always joke," Brent said to him. He reached out until he had Ricky's hands in his. Ricky went a little closer to him. Brent seemed to know what the real issue was without having to be told.

"Sometimes we're supposed to be sad. We're sad because we're alive and someone else isn't. And we miss them."

"You mean Mommy," Ricky said. He looked ready to cry.

"And your other dad too."

"They didn't live happily ever after," Ricky said.

"No. But they were happy. Your mom and dad went all sorts of different places and did all sorts of fun things. And remember all the good times we had with your mom. She was happy for a long time. Try to remember her smile," Brent told him.

Ricky frowned like maybe he couldn't. Nate wondered if Ricky only remembered his mom from the time when she was sick.

"Remember how her hair was very straight and dark, and she had dark eyes like Georgie. And she would slap her desk when something made her mad. And you used to play on the floor of her office, but she would forget and say a bad word when she was talking on the phone. Then she would say, 'Mommy is sorry, peanut.' And you would laugh."

Ricky thought about it really hard. Then he said, "Kind of." His eyes had gone wide like he wanted to see everything Brent told him and remember it forever.

When Nate went back to the library, Brent followed him.

"Are you here to distract me?" Nate asked him.

"I could rub your feet while you read," Brent offered as a bribe so Nate would let him stay.

Since Nate was a sucker for a massage, he agreed but pointed higher.

"Shoulders."

"I can do both. I could rub you all over." Seeing Nate's look, he scaled back his offer, "Fine. Just the shoulders."

"You don't have to," Nate said taking Brent's hand as he got behind him. Nate looked up at him.

"I want to," Brent told him.

They stared at each other too long, and Nate felt a ticklish warmth coursing through him and his cock stirring. His mind went right back to the night when Brent had worked him over in and out.

"Stop being sexy. I'm trying to work," he told Brent. His voice was low and thick. He suddenly felt overheated.

"Then stop looking at me with those damn gorgeous eyes. Keep those gorgeous eyes on your own paper," Brent said and pushed his head forward lightly.

Nate felt another rush of warmth spread through him from his touch. It only got worse as Brent took hold of his shoulders and kneaded them at first lightly then firmly. Nate groaned.

"I'm throwing you out," Nate said decisively and stood up.

Brent opened his mouth to object.

"You don't know how not to be sexy. Out," Nate ordered him.

"You can bend me over the desk real quick," Brent proposed.

"Not helping your case," Nate told him as he escorted him to the door. "Later," Nate promised him, giving him a quick kiss before he went back to what he was doing. Right before he turned away, he had seen Brent's face brighten. He did like making Brent happy. Too bad it was a school night.

When Nate came home from his class and went to his room, he found Brent there. Brent lay sprawled on his bed, asleep. Nate closed the door gently. He put down his book bag and enjoyed the view. After a little while, Brent turned then rubbed his eyes to wake himself. Nate got to watch him like that for a few moments before Brent noticed he was there.

"You're back," Brent said sleepily. "I was enjoying your bed." Brent looked at him so sweetly, Nate just wanted to jump him.

A few rainy days had followed one another, making the kids a little stir crazy. Today sunshine was back, and Nate was going to take the kids outside. Just as he was about to round them up, he heard the front door open and Georgie scream with excitement.

"Quin is back!" Georgie announced to everyone as she ran to him and jumped in place with her arms raised until he picked her up.

"Gimme presents!" were her words of greeting to Quin.

"What are you talking about? I don't have any presents," Quin told her.

"Gimme!" she insisted, not fooled.

Quin reached in his pocket and handed Georgie a bag of some cheap looking, strawberry shaped candy. She screamed in delight and ran off with it.

"You got that at a convenience store, didn't you?" Nate accused him.

Quin didn't hesitate to own up to that.

"Yes, I did," he said as Ricky came to greet him. "I hear that under Nate's regime, all the rules are flying out the window, so you get this." Quin handed Ricky a comic book. It looked like an issue of Justice League.

Ricky was ready to walk off with it, mesmerized. As Nate stopped him, Ricky looked worried that he was about to lose his precious new reading material.

"You forgot to say thank you," Nate told him.

"Thank you, Quin!" Ricky said. It was possibly the most heartfelt thank you anyone had ever uttered. He was already reading as he walked away.

Quin pointed after him.

"This is the moment. This right here. The boy's first comic book," Quin said.

"You mean he wasn't allowed to read comic books?" Nate asked. "But he was born to read comic books."

"He'll never pick up a regular book again. All thanks to your new, anything goes policy." Quin gave him a big, evil grin.

Nate had to defend himself.

"It's not anything goes. We're going to ration those," Nate decided. He didn't want Ricky to drop regular books.

"Did you get me anything?" Brent said as he came downstairs.

"You bet. Not out here though," Quin said as he looked in the direction where the kids had gone.

"We need privacy? Must be good," Brent said.

John poked his head out of the office.

"Not the way you think," John told him.

They went into the office where John had some papers spread out on the desk. He finished up with something on the computer then explained.

"We might not need Colliers. Quin found something we can use against Davis," John said. He was wearing a proud smile as he looked at Quin.

"Is that where you've been?" Nate said.

Quin confirmed it.

"Davis spends a lot of his time on the West Coast so I went digging over there, to see if anything turned up," Quin said.

"You hit pay dirt?" Brent asked.

"In Seattle. That's where Davis was based for a while, but he hasn't set foot there since. The way he went after Greta gave me an idea. Davis has an eye for women with money so I looked into that. One relationship in particular raised a red flag. Davis got real chummy with a certain Lana Porter-Reed. She is rich and well past middle age. Davis had a close, personal relationship with her. Only after they broke up, she wasn't as rich as she used to be."

"Davis swindled her," Brent guessed.

"Had her invest in some resort that was going to be built in the Philippines. Then he claimed the money was lost when the project got derailed because of local politics and unrest. It turned out to be pure fiction. That's when Lana kicked Davis to the curb."

"Is that all she did?" Nate asked.

"Not at first. She had investigators dig up proof against Davis. She wanted to get her money back without the embarrassment of going public with how she got taken by her pasty, little boy toy. She confronted Davis with the evidence, and the asshole showed her sex videos of her he got with a hidden camera. Threatened to put them online."

"What a sleaze," Nate said.

"Yup. She wasn't looking to be a porn star so that pretty much neutralized Lana."

"Where is the good news?" Brent wanted to know.

"Davis couldn't get her to hand over the evidence. Unfortunately, neither could I. But she did share some good information with me. With her pointing out the shortcuts, I dug up some of the same evidence. It's not enough to land Davis in jail, but it will catch the eye of the other investors who lost money in that resort scheme. And I don't think Davis has sex tapes to hold over their heads. Even if they don't all go after him, his reputation can't take that kind of hit. We show the evidence to Davis first. If he doesn't back off, we pass it around."

"So this woman just told you about the sex tapes and everything?"

Nate asked.

"The lady was looking for a way to get back at Davis," Quin said modestly.

"Still, you must have been persuasive," Nate said. Quin wasn't officially a private investigator yet. Nate was pretty impressed with him.

John narrowed his eyes at Quin.

"How persuasive were you?" John asked.

"Come on now. You know I wouldn't give it up just to save his ass," Quin said and indicated Brent. He then smiled at John disarmingly.

Brent got in the way of that smile so he could hug Quin. As he thanked him he didn't let go for a while. He kept that hug going just long enough for Nate to get a little jealous.

"I didn't do it for you. I was honing my PI skills," Quin claimed as he pushed Brent off him.

"Did you know Quin was doing this?" Nate asked John.

"You think my boyfriend leaves town without telling me where he's going and what he's doing?" John asked, appalled.

"No?" Nate said.

"Damn right he doesn't." John said then he turned to Brent. "This gets you off the hook with Colliers."

"I can't cancel on him now. I can't afford to offend him again," Brent said with a shake of his head. "Maybe we don't need Harvey, but we also don't need him taking Davis's side against us.

"You're still going to make nice?" John asked, astonished. Then he turned to Nate as if he expected him to object.

"I'm not planning on leaving him alone with this guy. So I have no problem with it," Nate said. He would make damn sure Colliers didn't get out of hand while Brent tried to charm him.

Quin and John went off together while Brent teased them about their reunion.

It was a pleasant, sunny afternoon after a few days of rain. Nate was outside with the kids. There were several swings set up all over the grounds. Nate pushed Georgie on one of them.

"Higher! Higher!" she kept demanding though Nate was pushing her as hard as he dared.

"Georgie, there is no higher unless you want to flip over."

"Yeah!"

"No."

Once Georgie got tired of that, Nate sat under the tree to read and take notes. Birds were calling to each other as leaves rustled overhead. When Nate looked up, he could see the lower clouds moving across the sky while others looked like they were pinned in place. Georgie

was playing nearby. Some tiny, brown birds perched along a low branch had her excited. When they landed to peck at the ground, she believed she could catch them with her bare hands. Nate raised his eyes off the page every few minutes to check on her. As he did it again, he saw Brent standing with his eyes raised to the canopy of the tree looking for Ricky. When he spotted him, he waved to him then came closer to Nate.

"Is that homework?" Brent asked seeing that Nate had two notebooks in his hands.

"I'm writing a paper on some of Professor Pullman's work. I think it's important to relate what he wrote to his reference materials. Since I am looking through that stuff, it's a good opportunity to note how his particular sources influenced his conclusions. Who knows where his collection will end up, maybe scattered."

Nate looked up to see Brent giving him one of those bemused looks.

"You're so cute," Brent told him.

"When I'm talking about this stuff, do you just watch my mouth move?" Nate asked him.

"No. I am using my imagination as well. You're doing some seriously obscene stuff right now," Brent whispered.

"I bet you could repeat everything I said word for word," Nate said to him.

Brent's eyes widened.

"How dare you accuse me of paying attention?"

"Stop faking boredom and sit down," Nate told him.

"I assume some contact comes with that invitation," Brent said as he sat down next to him.

"Of course it does," Nate said as he leaned against him.

"More," Brent demanded.

Nate only laughed at him. To get what he wanted, Brent shifted and put his arm around Nate.

"See, I'm better than leaning against a tree."

"You're better than pretty much anything," Nate admitted.

Brent nuzzled him and held him tighter. Nate couldn't help but think about living his whole life in Brent's arms. He had never had such a desperate feeling of wanting to make someone happy. Above, he noticed Ricky looking down from the tree at them. Nate smiled up at him and winked.

Chapter 28

On the night of Harvey Colliers' visit, everyone was nervous but Brent. The kids had sensed the excitement in the air and made trouble before they were finally put to bed.

In the big, formal sitting room, hors d'oeuvres and drinks were set up while innocuous music was playing in the background. John had insisted on approving everyone's clothes. Nate barely passed inspection. Quin seemed calm, but every few minutes he would crack his knuckles. John paced, stopped, glared at everyone, then paced again. Nate tried to keep still and act cool, but he knew he was doing a bad job faking it when Brent gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

When he finally arrived, Harvey Colliers was a vision in a purple shirt, gray, pinstriped suit, a yellow and gray striped tie, and a ring on every finger. His hair was thinning but precisely styled. He carried himself with great seriousness, and he spoke exactly like Dan Rather. Everything he said sounded like he was delivering some grave news of national importance. At first he was merely polite as Brent greeted him at the door and led him to the sitting room. Then he saw Nate, Quin, and John waiting there, and he beamed. They all might have had the intention of acting as Brent's bodyguards, but that's not how Harvey Colliers saw them.

"My dear boy," he said to Brent in his sonorous voice. "You certainly know how to welcome an old friend." Harvey looked at them like they were some kind of offering.

"Does he think we're on the menu?" Nate whispered to John, who only shushed him.

After looking longingly at each one of them, Colliers opened his arms and went up to Brent.

"All is forgiven." He clasped Brent to him. "I was a bit tipsy, what can I say."

"And I overreacted because of Greta," Brent said.

"I would have kept it strictly between us," Harvey said as if he wasn't aware that discretion wasn't the main reason he was rejected.

"I wanna see him! I wanna see him!" Georgie said as she ran into the room. She gasped when she saw Harvey then she clapped. Maybe she thought he was some kind of performer.

"She got away from me," Ricky said, coming in behind her.

"The little ones too. I feel so welcome. If I hadn't already forgiven you, I would be doing it now." Harvey held a hand to his heart as he looked from the kids to Brent.

Georgie was wide-eyed as she looked at Harvey. Before anyone could stop her, she ran up to him and jumped up and down with her

arms open for a hug. Harvey picked her up. Perched on his big belly, she giggled as he held her.

"I want lots of big balloons and no stinky socks under my pillow," she said for some odd reason.

"Who does she think he is?" Nate asked Ricky, whispering in his ear.

"Georgie is crazy," Ricky said unhelpfully.

Nate looked around the room, but everyone looked clueless. Since Georgie was happy and Harvey was pleased, no one wanted to spoil their fun.

"I remember putting you to bed," Brent told her.

"Aha," Georgie agreed without getting the message.

"I'll put them back in their beds," Nate offered. He took Georgie from Harvey, who looked sad to give her up as she waved to him.

Upstairs, Nate sent Ricky to his room then he questioned Georgie.

"Do you know that man?" Nate asked her.

"He's the Purple Rolly-Polly Man," she told him.

"Is that from a story?"

"Ricky peeked down the stairs. He said the Purple Rolly-Polly Man was here."

Nate decided that Ricky's version would probably make more sense. He waited until Georgie was asleep before he went to Ricky's room. He was still awake.

"Who is the Purple Rolly-Polly Man?" Nate asked him as he sat on his bed.

"I made him up."

"You saw that man from the top of the stairs and made up a story about him?"

"Yes," Ricky admitted. "The Purple Rolly-Polly Man checks up on kids to see if they're being good. If they are, he brings them balloons and ponies for their birthday and extra presents. If they're bad, he puts stinky socks under their pillows."

Nate smiled at Ricky's version of a Birthday Santa Claus embodied by Harvey Colliers.

"OK. Tomorrow you are telling that story to your dad?" Nate told him.

"Why?" Ricky asked like he thought he might be in trouble.

"Because he'll like it. Now go to sleep."

Nate came back downstairs just in time to hear Colliers discussing what set Davis off.

"Greta was a hell of a businesswoman, and she had exceptional taste in men," Colliers was saying while looking at Brent as proof. "Davis didn't stand an ice cube's chance in Hell of getting near her, and everyone knew it but him. A couple of weeks ago, I guess it was, I was

at the Evans's party. Davis was there, maybe invited, probably not. He got a little too drunk and said something about Greta, how he was cheated of his chance with her by big, bad Brent. I'm afraid quite a few people laughed at him. He thinks Brent made him a laughingstock when it was really all his own doing."

"All this because people made fun of him at some party?" Quin asked, not believing his ears.

"The male ego is a fragile thing. I can attest to that." Colliers looked at Brent meaningfully.

"I don't see how bothering Brent's kids will salvage his bruised ego," Nate said as he joined them.

"He approached the children?" Colliers seemed seriously upset by this. "That cannot be tolerated. Davis is a poisonous little toad. He simply oozes poison."

"He scared Ricky," Nate added since he was on a roll.

"That darling, shy, little blond boy? That's inexcusable. You will not have to worry about him again," Colliers assured him.

"This might help," John said and handed Colliers copies of the evidence Quin had found. John explained what it meant as Colliers looked it over.

"I was just going to threaten to sit on him," Colliers joked.

"Maybe that would appeal to him," Brent said. They all glared at him except for Colliers, who laughed.

"I forgot how much I enjoyed your company," he said smiling at Brent fondly. Brent smiled back.

As he was leaving, Colliers said to Brent, "So I'm not such a bad man?"

Brent hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

"Sorry I called you a fat fuck," Brent said.

John was ready to have a stroke, but Colliers smiled.

"You've grown up since then, haven't you?" Colliers said and cupped Brent's face. He sighed then left.

"What were you doing?" John asked Brent as soon as he was sure Colliers was gone.

"Being myself," Brent told him.

"Stop it!" he said though Colliers didn't seem to mind the real Brent. John was still tense from the meeting, but everyone else breathed a sigh of relief.

"Can we actually count on Colliers to follow through?" Nate wanted to know.

"If Harvey says it, it's as good as done," Brent told him.

Later in the week, John reported that Davis left for the West Coast and wasn't expected back. While Nate was still at work, Brent went to

visit Harvey without telling anyone. He took Ricky and Georgie with him to chaperone, but he made Georgie promise to keep Harvey's secret identity as the Purple Rolly-Polly Man a secret even from him.

He told Nate about the visit as soon as he got home.

"It went fine," Brent reassured Nate. "The kids had fun. Some of Harvey's art needed a little creative explaining, but he was fully stocked with desserts, so the visit was a success. Georgie is a huge fan of petits fours. Harvey invited us back any time."

"So now you and Harvey Colliers are best friends?" Nate asked.

"He isn't a bad guy. I was just scared of him because I had a big secret to keep," Brent said. "At that time, he seemed just like all those guys who were swarming around me, trying to get a piece of me when they thought I couldn't afford to say no."

"And he wasn't?"

"I don't know. But that doesn't matter now."

"Because you're happy," Nate concluded and kissed him. "Let's see how you take this. I have good news and bad news. Professor Pullman's old college got a grant, and now they want to house his collection and his papers. The collection will be named after him and everything. That moves things up. I'll need to stay later over there and work Saturdays to get my own research done and to sort things out in a hurry. At this point my main job is to make sure that nothing from his personal journals or letters gets mixed up with his academic papers."

"I can fill in for you here," Brent volunteered before Nate even asked him. And he even corrected himself. "I know, I know. They're my kids. I'm not doing you a favor."

"You are, and I appreciate it," Nate told him.

Brent was surprised.

"I'm scoring some major points here," he said to Nate.

"Just you wait. When I have time to show my appreciation, you'll be in for it."

"I love doing favors for you," Brent said with a smile. He wrapped his arms around Nate and gazed into his dark eyes.

Brent hadn't liked hearing that Nate was going to be away so much, but he knew this wasn't the time to be selfish. Plus after Miss Pullman didn't need him any more, Brent would get him full time, though he might have to share him with the kids.

Taking over for Nate wasn't going to be a big change. Brent was already spending more time at home. With Nate there giving him confidence, he was acting almost like a real parent. He felt more solid and real, like he mattered. And Nate had said, "The more you're around, the more Ricky likes you."

Brent found that incredible.

"I thought it would be the other way around," he told Nate. But he had noticed that Ricky was quicker to smile these days, and his laugh was the most beautiful sound, especially when joined with Georgie's. Brent had been stupid not to spend more time with them. He hoped they would forgive their stupid dad, and Brent promised to make himself worthy of every smile they gave him.

Brent was relaxing in the sunroom, thinking about how good his life had become when Ricky went by.

"Hey, my blue eyed boy. Come and sit with me," Brent said to him.

Ricky grumbled at the familiar endearment but came to sit next to him. Brent saw that he had a book in his hand.

"Read to me a little," Brent requested.

"It's for kids," Ricky said.

"That's OK."

"Do I start from the beginning?"

"No. Just from where you left off."

Ricky read but sometimes stopped to explain something, sort of like he did for Georgie. Brent still couldn't follow the story, but he didn't mind. It was nice just to have Ricky reading to him and talking to him.

"I think I'm looking forward to being a stay-at-home dad," Brent said to Nate that night after the kids were in bed.

Nate was glad to hear it. He kissed Brent as the two of them were holding each other in Brent's bedroom.

"I kind of envy you. I'm going to see so little of them," Nate said. "Don't let them grow up without me."

"Did I hear you right?" Brent asked.

Instead of answering, Nate kissed him. His tongue explored Brent's mouth.

"You're playing dirty," Brent accused him as they pulled back.

"That's not playing dirty. This is playing dirty." Nate reached down Brent's abdomen slowly so there was no question where he was headed. He grazed his crotch lightly letting only the suggestion of a touch pass through the fabric of his jeans. The bulge under his zipper still grew. His next light touch found him bigger and harder, straining to be freed.

While Nate unbuttoned him with deliberate slowness, Brent's lips were hard against his. Then as that first desperate need passed, the kiss became softer but deeper. Both of them were trying to get closer, quench their desire in a kiss. But a kiss couldn't do that. It just made them tear each other's clothes off. They almost wrestled trying to be the first to get the other naked. Brent grabbed for Nate's cock and

moaned when he found it hard.

"It's all yours," Nate told him.

Brent dropped to his knees. Desperate to have it, he still took the time to show his appreciation with light, teasing strokes of his tongue. He looked up at Nate and smiled before he slowly let it enter his mouth enjoying every inch, driving Nate out of his mind. As his cock was sheathed slowly in Brent's mouth, wrapped in its slick heat, Brent maintained pressure as he let Nate's cock slide out. He swirled his tongue around the head before letting it back in. Nate moaned as the sensation of being in Brent's mouth went right through him. He felt like he was burning with pleasure that only burned brighter as Brent moved faster and sucked harder. Nate was helpless to him. Hardly able to stand, he was rocking with the suction, pumping just enough to please Brent and make him moan over his cock. The deep moan rewarded Nate with a wonderful vibration that shook him to the bone. Brent's mouth tightened around him and made him come long and hard. He laughed with relief and happiness while Brent looked up at him with a blissful smile and a stained chin.

The next morning, Nate saw that Brent was standing in the bathroom doorway. Nate was at the sink with a towel wrapped around his hips after a shower.

"I like watching you shave," Brent explained to answer Nate's questioning look.

"You're just hoping that this thing is going to slip down, aren't you?" Nate accused him, pointing at the towel.

"I'm a man of action," Brent claimed. To prove it, he snatched Nate's towel right off him and tossed it aside.

Nate just kept shaving.

"This isn't much of a show. I dated a guy who used a straight razor," Nate told him.

"He liked to put a little danger into his morning routine," Brent guessed. Coming up behind Nate, he sneaked a hands around Nate's waist and stroked him lightly.

"He was just pretentious," Nate said. Then he noticed what else Brent was doing. "Why are you sniffing me?"

"You smell good," Brent said as he pressed his face against the back of Nate's head.

"That's your own shampoo."

"It smells extra good on you."

"Are you going to lick me next?"

"Since you asked," Brent said and got down on his knees.

Just then there was a terrifying noise at Brent's bedroom door. It was Georgie's version of knocking followed by yelling on finding the

door locked.

Brent stood up, pulled on his boxers and put on a robe. He opened his bedroom door wide. Nate got decent just in time.

"Is the house on fire?" Brent asked Georgie.

"I don't know. I want cereal, and Nate said not to climb on the counter," she said while looking up at Brent and ignoring his glowering expression.

"Are you being good?" Brent leaned down as if taking a closer look at her. "Who are you, and what have you done with my Georgie?" Brent asked her.

"Daddy, you are crazy," Georgie said to him rightly.

"Yes," Brent told her.

"Stop confusing her," Nate said, stepping in. He told Georgie, "You did good, honey. We'll be right down to give you breakfast."

"While I go hungry?" Brent said after the door was closed, and he saw that Nate was putting on pants.

"I guess you still have some growing up to do," Nate decided as he got dressed and Brent pouted.

Quin had just brought the kids home, and Brent was giving them their after school snacks. Since the snacks were whole wheat crackers with cream cheese and chives topped with a cucumber slice, the kids were giving him dirty looks.

John came in and saw him as he tried to get the kids to at least try them.

"It's like you're the manny," John told him.

"What's so strange about me taking care of my own kids?" Brent said.

"Who are you?" John asked, echoing the question Brent had put to Georgie that morning.

Brent decided to echo her answer.

"I'm love crazy," Brent said. Then he pulled John further away from the kitchen table where the kids were trying to dare each other to eat the snacks.

John waited for Brent to speak, but he was suddenly tongue-tied. Brent finally blurted out, "You know how love can fill you up, rush through your veins, make your head all fuzzy and clear at the same time?"

"Yes," John admitted grudgingly.

"Now I do too."

"Well don't expect it to go away."

"I don't want it to go away. I want it to last forever," Brent looked at John earnestly then he asked, "Do you think Nate has that feeling too?"

"The crazy feeling. Obviously he does, or he would never let you near him. And why are you asking me?"

Brent didn't address that, he said, "I thought maybe he was too sane."

"Maybe he was sane before he came here, but he's not sane now that he's under your spell."

Seeing Brent smiling like an idiot, John smiled too.

Meanwhile, Georgie was trying to make Ricky eat by shoving a cracker in his face.

"You are about to have a food fight on your hands," John informed him and left him to mop up.

Brent got the kids to eat a few bites by showing them the crackers were nontoxic by eating a few himself. He then gave them a banana each and took them outside.

When Nate got home in the evening, the kids ran to him excitedly, talking over each other to get his attention. It was clear how much

they missed him, and Brent did too. They had dinner then Brent did the dishes under Georgie's supervision. According to Nate's instructions, she yelled, "Keep scrubbing!" even though that was the dishwasher's job. Nate and Ricky were tucked away in the library.

"Look at those guys," Brent said as he and Georgie walked in.

Both Nate and Ricky looked up. They had each taken a desk and had their noses buried in books.

"They are always reading," Georgie complained.

"Let's go bother them," Brent proposed. Georgie was always up for that.

"You already are," Nate told Brent, who winked at him.

"Why are they always bothering us?" Ricky said. He looked at Nate with a pout.

"Because they like us," Nate told him.

He was right about that. Seeing them reading together, so different and so alike, warmed him up inside. Brent was glad he had brought someone into Ricky's life that he could identify with. And Brent wasn't going to be shy about taking credit. Even if he didn't do anything else right, he made Nate a part of their lives.

Brent sat on the floor with Georgie in his lap and read to her. He chose *Pinocchio* because he wanted to become real too. Brent was surprised by how scary some of it was, both the illustrations and the text, but Georgie just urged him to keep going. Hopefully, it wouldn't give her nightmares. Ricky joined them, sitting down next to Brent. He leaned over to look at the book. As he got into the story, he rested his head against Brent's arm. Nate came over next and stretched out on the floor with his hands behind his head. From his expression, Brent could tell that he was listening to the story as well.

The kids didn't want him to stop reading, but Brent decided it was enough for one day. They went off to play.

"It's too much?" Brent said and went to lie down on the floor next to Nate.

Nate gave him a questioning look.

"All this. I'm too happy, and I haven't earned it. I made a deal to live in comfort, not happiness," Brent said while staring at the ceiling.

"That doesn't mean that you're not allowed to be happy." Nate shifted closer.

"Do I deserve to be?"

Nate was resting on one elbow, facing him. When he spoke, his voice was low.

"Just take my word for it. This is your home, these are your kids, and you deserve to be happy."

Brent felt Nate's kiss on his shoulder.

"OK. As long as you stay and keep bad things from happening," Brent said and reached for Nate. He rubbed the back of his head and pulled his hand to his chest.

Instead of telling him he was crazy, Nate agreed. "If I have that power, then I will."

Even as Nate said what he wanted to hear, Brent felt the pain that had become so familiar since Nate had come into his life.

"Why does it hurt so much to want to be with someone even when you're with them?" Brent asked. It was such a strange pain, like love was some sharp, hot thing he wanted desperately but couldn't handle.

"You know why," Nate told him and ran his fingers through Brent's hair.

"Because I'm afraid I'll lose you. But I won't, right?" Brent looked for reassurance and Nate gave it.

"Never," Nate confirmed. "Feel better?"

"Everything is better with you. When I'm in your arms, I have everything," Brent said and pulled Nate closer.

"Same here. I never even knew I could be so happy," Nate said.

Brent thought his heart might burst when he heard Nate say that. Brent gazed at him in wonder.

"I think I've been waiting for you. I wanted to be happy. I just didn't want to start without you," Brent said.

"Well, I'm here."

"And you're staying." Brent wanted to confirm it.

"Yes," Nate said.

What a wonderful word.

Nate and Brent gave the kids piggyback rides up to their rooms. They took turns sitting with the kids until they fell asleep. As he walked hand in hand with Brent to his room, Nate understood why Brent had trouble believing this was all real. It was sort of unreal to Nate too. It was strange to think that this could be his life. The thought made him kind of giddy. To spend his life with Brent and Ricky and Georgie, it would be an adventure. A life complete with a wonderful man and two great kids, that was something Nate hoped for and imagined some time in the future. And it was all here, his for the taking. Nate felt like he had won an incredible prize without even entering a contest. How could it be real? It seemed more like a dream. But between them, he and Brent were making it real.

Maybe it was even too real. Nate hadn't realized what it would feel like. Even just sleeping in the same bed with Brent was addictive. He wanted to go to sleep with him every night and wake up next to him every morning. Love filled his heart till it hurt. The heart couldn't take it, but love didn't have any limits, it just kept growing. Brent must

have known it. Maybe that's why he was scared of the kids. They were so small, and they ran down marble staircases and climbed big trees, like they were invulnerable. Love was terrifying. Maybe that's why neither of them had said the words, but Nate knew they were both close. The words were on the tips of their tongues.

"I'm in a good mood. Speak up. What's your heart's desire?" Brent asked suddenly as they stood in his bedroom, like there was anything more that Nate could want.

"You are," Nate said

"Is it too soon to tell you I love you?" Brent asked.

"You have something to say?" Nate said to challenge him and tease him.

"Just say when," Brent told him.

"I'll let you know," Nate said and turned away.

"Now. I want to say it now," Brent demanded, then he backed off a little. "You don't have to say it back," he said to let him off the hook.

"Who knows, maybe you'll say it so sweet, I'll want to say it back."

"I'll put my whole heart into it. I've been worried that we were moving too fast, but I don't know how to slow down. I tried but I couldn't. I just want to be with you so much. I may not deserve you, but I love you."

Nate kissed him because the best way to answer an I love you was with a kiss. But he had something to say too.

"You're too easy to fall in love with. I never had a chance. I love you, Brent. But I love you more each second. I've passed the limit of what words can say. You'll just have to read the rest in my heart."

"Oh, Nate," Brent said and threw himself into his arms so hard they fell on the bed. Kissing desperately, they were trying to hold on to each other tight then tighter still. They eased off, deciding it was good enough just to be in the circle of the other's arms for a while. Their kisses were less desperate, deeper and more intimate. If words couldn't express what they felt maybe their bodies could.

Brent pushed up Nate's t-shirt and licked from his abs to his chest. Nate got rid of his clothes first, and Brent attacked him without removing his own. Brent was just too impatient. Now Nate had to struggle to remove his clothes while Brent kissed and fondled him, trying to be everywhere at once. Finally they were both naked, and Nate could run his hands all over Brent's body. As he did that, Brent was lying on top of him. He spread his fingers over Nate's chest, leaned in and licked his bottom lip. Nate's mouth opened, inviting a kiss. Nate didn't move though, and Brent held back, out of reach, teasing him. Nate laughed. Grabbing hold of Brent, Nate now ran his tongue over his bottom lip in retaliation. Now they were both dying to

be kissed. Their mouths opened and came in contact. Silently, their lips and tongues spoke about love. They went at each other hungry and moaning, pulling at one another, groping roughly.

Nate groaned and threw his head back as Brent played with his nipples.

"You're wonderful," he said while locking his eyes on Nate's.

Nate could hardly hear him. The sensation of Brent's lips and tongue, the feel of his body, the scent of his skin, his taste, followed by that burning look in his eyes – it was all too much. Nate felt drunk as Brent went back to showing his love with his tongue and teeth.

Nate arched his back and rose toward that mouth which was now tugging at his nipple. Reaching his arms over his head, Nate stretched himself out as Brent kissed and licked his way down. Nate stayed like that and held on to the edge of the mattress. He would keep rising toward Brent forever. Brent pushed him down with the weight of his own body on top of him. Pinned in place, Nate had no choice but to enjoy the feeling of Brent running his hands from his outstretched arms then down all over his body while he kissed him.

Moving past his abdomen, Brent used his mouth on his cock very lightly so Nate knew that a blowjob wasn't his goal. When he stopped, Nate still let out a moan muffled by Brent's mouth on his. He draped his body on top of Nate's. Nate loved the weight of his muscles pressing down. Very slowly, Nate ran his hands over the back of Brent's neck then lower over rippling muscles to that magnificent ass. Nate pulled Brent's thighs up toward him. Brent straightened until he was straddling him. More than ready, Nate grabbed the lube and handed the condom to Brent. He put it on Nate with his mouth.

Reaching around to Brent's ass, Nate slipped a fingers in. With his head back, Brent opened up for him. He moaned then stopped Nate. His whole body on display for Nate, he lowered himself on those muscular legs until the head of Nate's cock was inside him. Brent pushed down hard while his ass gripped Nate's cock tightly. Nate slowed him down. He wanted to stop time, hold on to every second forever. He wanted to look at Brent as he sank down to surround him.

"Like this?" Brent asked as he took in Nate's cock in slow motion.

A moan deep in his throat was the answer as Brent arched. He rose and fell in ecstasy, starting to sweat. Nate ran his hands over his thighs and pushed up, wanting to be inside him, filling him. Time was speeding up. Brent rode him harder, and Nate's hips kept up pace. Straining, their muscles stood out, hard and strong, driving their bodies to slam together. Their fierce pounding ended in a burst of pleasure that swept them under, like they were drowning in each other.

Nate was almost done with his work at Miss Pullman's. Now he was just making a final run through. With so little to do, he came home earlier than he had for a while. He was there just in time to see the kids grumbling over the hummus and pita chips Brent had served them for a snack. Nate grabbed some for himself with no hesitation. That pleased Brent and made the kids give them a chance too.

Later, in the library, Nate told Ricky that he should always have a taste before he decided that he didn't like something.

"My dad... I mean Brent," Ricky corrected himself.

"You mean your dad," Nate said with a smile.

"He makes weird food. We just want peanut butter," Ricky said speaking for himself and Georgie.

Nate decided to leave the issue of snacks and focus on something else.

"You know, you could just call him Dad sometimes, just to make him feel good. He would like that," Nate said to Ricky though he didn't want to push him.

"Maybe," Ricky agreed tentatively then he added, "I wish me and Georgie had the same dad."

"You do, and you know it."

"I have another dad," Ricky reminded him.

"That just means you have two. And one day, you might have three," Nate told him, trying not to smile.

"How?" Ricky wanted to know.

Nate tried to figure out how to phrase the answer. Then he fell back on his usual solution.

"Ask your dad."

Brent was texting in the sunroom when Ricky came in, looking for him. For a while he just stood in front of Brent, who waited for him to speak up.

"Nate said I'll have three dads one day," Ricky said quietly, almost like he was talking to himself.

Brent couldn't help but grin at his words.

"If I'm lucky, you will," Brent told him.

"How?" Ricky said looking at Brent curiously.

"I'll get married to someone like Nate, and there you go, a third dad for you."

"Nate?" Ricky said, his eyes growing big.

"I didn't say it would be Nate," Brent claimed.

"You said Nate," Ricky said with a very serious expression on his face.

"That's because I was thinking of Nate. He's nice."

"Yes," Ricky said fiercely. He had come close to Brent to stare at him. "Are you making jokes again?"

"No," Brent assured him, but before he could say more Georgie ran in.

"Are you playing without me?" she asked.

"Yes. We had all kinds of fun with big balloons and everything," Brent told her.

She looked around.

"Where are the balloons?" Georgie asked.

"We popped them all," Brent said, and Georgie jumped on him.

"You can't pop balloons without me! It's not allowed!" she yelled into his face as he laughed.

Behind her Ricky grumbled.

All that talk about snacks made Nate hungry again. He made himself a quick ham and cheese sandwich. He was eating it when Brent came in.

"So you want to get married?" he said.

Nate gaped at him for a while.

"You didn't just say that," Nate told him.

"I promised Ricky I'd ask. So do you want to?"

"That's how you're proposing to me, and over a half eaten sandwich, next to a sink of dirty dishes? Are you looking for a no?" Nate asked him.

Brent sighed.

"Fine, I'll do it right. It'll be all roses and candlelight and a ring hidden inside a cupcake."

"Don't gross me out," Nate warned him.

But Brent had gotten a look on his face. He leaned over the counter to say, "Tonight, I'll be doing this again, and you'll be saying yes so hard, I won't be able to sit for a week."

"OK. You're on," Nate said and continued to eat his sandwich.

"I can't believe you're making me want to get married," Brent said as he folded his arms.

"Same to you. I was thinking I would be in my late thirties. Maybe even forties. Then there you are all gorgeous and irresistible." Nate smiled as Brent's soft brown eyes gazed into his.

"Marriage is just another way of saying I want you forever," Brent said in a deep voice that reached right to Nate's heart. He wished he had said yes already.

"Do this proposal right, and you can have me forever," Nate told him instead of rushing things.

"That's almost a yes," Brent said then he looked over his shoulder.

When he saw Ricky advancing on them, Brent ran away.

"You said people didn't have to get married," Ricky whined to Nate. Either Brent had told him what he was planning or he had heard enough to figure out what was happening.

"Sometimes they want to." Nate wondered if Ricky was really against the idea.

"Is it because you love each other?" he asked, proving that he remembered what Nate told him before.

"Yes, we love each other very much, and we love you and Georgie too," Nate said to him. "When Brent and I get married, we'll all be a family."

Ricky frowned and sighed.

"I guess it's OK if it's you," Ricky said with a little pout. Nate hugged him.

From around the corner, Brent asked Nate, "Did you get his approval?" Then he poked his head out.

"Get out here, you coward," Nate told him.

Brent came forward and leaned down to peer at Ricky.

"Is it OK?"

"It's fine," Ricky said.

"That's my Ricky!" Brent exclaimed. He hugged him and lifted him off the ground. As Brent kissed his pouting face noisily, Ricky tried not to smile.

That evening Quin and John were there, ready to baby-sit. The two of them, plus Brent and the kids were waiting for Nate at the bottom of the stairs. Brent wore a black suit, white shirt, no tie. He paced then looked at Quin and John. Going over to them, he crossed their fingers for them and warned them, "Keep them crossed."

"What for?" John grumbled. "You are rich. A yes is pretty much guaranteed."

"He is going to say yes because he loves me, you cynic," Brent told him.

He hugged the kids then picked up both of them for a spin. Once he put them down, he crossed the kids' fingers too.

"I know how to cross my fingers," Ricky said.

"It's a special occasion so let me do it," Brent told him.

Ricky nodded. He knew something big was happening. Georgie just thought it was a game.

"It's so your dad will have good luck," he told Ricky and Georgie.

Nate came down in a nice shirt and slacks. Brent liked how he looked, but it wouldn't have killed him to put on a suit. Nate saw that everyone had their fingers crossed. He looked over at Brent, who impatiently told him, "Let's go." Nate took the time to hug everyone

first.

The Thunderbird was waiting in front. As they got in, Brent handed Nate a blindfold from the glove compartment.

"You have to wear this."

"You're not going to throw me in the trunk, are you?" Nate asked.

"That's plan B."

As they drove away, Nate hoped Brent hadn't gone overboard. The blindfold didn't reassure him about that.

"Everyone is going to think you are kidnapping me," Nate said. Though he couldn't see, he knew other people might see him in the convertible with its top down.

"I am kidnapping you," Brent said.

"It's kind of exhilarating," Nate had to admit. With his head thrown back to enjoy the feel of the wind as it whipped around him, smiling as he felt his body speed along in this awesome car, Nate must have been quite a sight.

"Since you like it so much, we can put that blindfold to a different use later," Brent proposed and squeezed his thigh.

"You know I like looking at you. But save it for when you lose your looks," Nate told him. He ran his hand up Brent's arm to his chest, and wondered who could see him doing it.

The drive took longer than Nate expected. They were going up and then they stopped, and Brent removed his blindfold. Nate blinked and took in the view. They were on a roadside spot overlooking the ocean. The sun was setting behind them turning the clouds orange and red and the ocean gold. It was beautiful and well worth the drive. He turned to Brent who was even more beautiful.

"Don't get excited, we aren't there yet," Brent said after letting Nate kiss him for a while.

They drove down toward a dock where only a handful of boats waited. Brent led the way to one of them. It was a nice boat with an open cabin, by no means a yacht. Two men disembarked and told Brent everything was ready. Brent led the way and Nate followed him on board.

"Why not a sailboat?" Nate asked to tease him.

"I don't know how to work one of those," Brent said. That meant that Brent would be at the controls, and they were going to be alone. Nate was glad as he watched him take off his jacket and go to stand at the wheel.

"Make yourself comfortable and don't get seasick." Those were his instructions to Nate.

"Aye aye, sir," Nate said as he took a seat aft. He could see a set of

stairs leading down. Brent said a tiny kitchen and bathroom, and two bedrooms were below.

Nate felt the boat start to move gently, then he felt it accelerate. As he watched Brent get them under way, Nate was surprised that he was so at ease on a boat considering what happened to his parents. Though he decided not to bring it up, Brent did.

"Being on a boat actually brings back happy memories," Brent said. He had to shout a little over the noise of the engine.

"The kind we're going to be making," Nate said with a smile.

"That's the plan," Brent agreed.

Holding on so he could stay upright, Nate moved closer to stand beside Brent at the controls. While looking toward the horizon, Brent talked.

"We used to have a boat just like this one. Mom and Dad got me a captain's hat when I was little and told me I was the captain. They would salute me and everything. When I was older, they would tell me, 'You steer. We want to get drunk and smooch.' We'd drop anchor somewhere out there. They would be sleeping off the champagne, wrapped in one another's arms. I would sneak a few sips of champagne, watch the stars and watch over them. Once I saw a star fall, or I might have dreamed it. But I remember thinking that I didn't want to waste my wish. I wanted to save it for later, for when I needed it."

Nate put his arm around him.

"I want to make every one of your wishes come true," he told Brent.

Brent turned to smile at him

"You're about to."

It was dark by the time they stopped. The darkening ocean was in every direction. Only a sliver of silvery light edged the horizon. The water shimmered with moonlight, blue-black like the sky. With its own lights, the boat floated inside a halo. Brent uncovered an icebox with champagne and some finger foods. After filling their glasses, he handed an oblong, wooden box to Nate.

"It's kind of big for a ring box," Nate said then he opened it. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He said a quiet "Wow. It's beautiful." It was a letter from a Revolutionary War soldier. The ink was faint but legible. The paper felt brittle in his hands. It was small and torn on three sides, possibly all a soldier could get his hands on. It read, "I have but a moment and only this scrap to let you know I am well. I thank you for your good wishes and patience. I too wait for the day of our union with hope for every happiness and joy in our life together. Thoughts of you sustain me through every hardship and give me strength. You are a blessing to me. Stay well." They were only a

few simple sentiments but ringing with truth.

"You got me an engagement letter? Brent, you're kind of amazing," Nate said. He was stunned.

"That means you like it," Brent said, happy to hear it.

"It's perfect. Now I have to say yes." Nate looked at him and wanted to give him his heart more than ever.

"That's what I was going for." Brent's eyes were glowing.

"I would have said yes over the dirty dishes too," Nate told him.

"And then never let me forget it."

"Oh, I'll still be bringing that up on every one of our anniversaries. I'll remind you that you tried to propose to me over a half eaten sandwich."

For a moment Brent looked overwhelmed by all that time ahead of them, all that happiness. Then he said, "I'm looking forward to it."

"You didn't just get this today," Nate said. He also knew someone like Brent didn't get it off eBay either.

"No. I told an antiques dealer to keep an eye out for Revolutionary War stuff. I got it a while ago to give you on Christmas or your birthday. I didn't think of proposing with it though."

Brent got a look in his eyes.

"What's that about?" Nate asked as he shifted closer.

"We are going to be married." Again he looked overwhelmed. It was like what was happening was hitting him in waves.

Nate took his hand. He ran the tip of his finger over Brent's ring finger.

"We'll have matching wedding bands and everything," Nate said. "There'll be a ton of guests, a table loaded down with gifts, drunk dancing and corny speeches."

"Let's elope," Brent said.

"Sure. We'll go pick up Georgie and Ricky, and John and Quin to be our witnesses, and my mom and my aunt and cousins."

"That's not eloping," Brent pointed out to him.

"It's good to have people in your life who would kill you if they missed your wedding."

"Yes, it is," Brent agreed and they kissed nearly spilling the champagne.

Setting aside their glasses, Nate climbed on top of Brent and kissed him for a long time. Their tongues slid over each other making them both moan. It was just a taste, a reminder of how much pleasure they had given each other and how much more they would give.

When Nate pulled back to unbutton his shirt, Brent asked, "Is this outdoors enough for you?"

"It's perfect, and I love you," Nate told him.

"Say you'll marry me," Brent demanded.

"I already did."

"Say the words."

"Brent, I want to marry you more than anything. Then I want to love you forever so you can drive me crazy."

"I love you. Will you marry me?" Brent said like he only now realized he hadn't said the words either.

"Yes," Nate said and laughed.

They kissed, entwined, taking off each other's clothes slowly. They pressed their bodies together and never stopped kissing as they made love. The waves splashed gently against the boat and rocked them to sleep in each other's arms.

Nate woke up to the rocking of the boat, the sounds of seabirds, and Brent's steadily beating heart. He lay still and listened to it, feeling the rise and fall of Brent's chest with his even breathing and the rising and falling of the boat as waves passed under it. The sea seemed less calm than last night, like it too had awakened. The sky was pale and clear with the cool light of dawn. Staying still, Nate waited for Brent to wake up on his own. In a little while, he felt him stirring, his body becoming animated. His hand slid down Nate's back then hooked around his waist. He kissed Nate's hair and said, "Good morning" in a husky voice. Nate raised his head to look at him.

"Good morning, beautiful," Nate told him. Just engaged and in a boat in the middle of the ocean, he was going to be as corny as he could be.

By the time they arrived home, it was morning, early but bright. When they went in, the house was quiet. It didn't stay that way for long.

"I got my man!" Brent yelled really loud as they walked in, trying to wake up the whole house.

There was no sign of Quin and John, but the kids came running from the direction of the kitchen but still in their pajamas. It was a big house so Quin and John might have slept right through that noise. Brent picked up both Ricky and Georgie and spun them around. Nate greeted them more gently. Looking eager and curious, the kids stared from Brent to Nate, waiting for the big news.

"I got him. I locked him down," Brent said as he squeezed Nate in a tight hug.

Since that didn't explain anything, Nate told the kids, "Your dad and I are going to be married. There's going to be a wedding and then..."

"I want to be the bride!" Georgie said.

"No. It's a real, grown up wedding," Ricky told her.

"So?" Georgie said.

"It's also a gay wedding," Nate threw in.

That only got him another "So?" from Georgie.

"There's no bride," Nate explained.

"I can be the bride," Georgie said.

"You can be the flower girl," Brent offered.

"Yey! And the bride!" Georgie insisted.

"You don't get it," Ricky told her. "The wedding is so Nate will be our dad."

"I might get something out of it too," Brent said as Georgie said, "Yey!" again and did a twirling little dance to celebrate.

"Maybe you can be the bride at Quin and John's wedding," Brent told her evilly. John and Quin had mentioned their plans, and now Brent was getting back at them for trying to upstage him.

"They are getting married too? To be our dads?" Georgie asked.

"No," Ricky told her. "She doesn't get it," he said to Brent and Nate.

"She will," Nate assured him.

"Maybe she has the right idea," Brent said with a smirk at Nate.

"You are this close to being a married man. Your harem building days are over," Nate told him.

"You're the only one I need," Brent said and pulled him close while looking into his eyes with love.

Since he was being so sweet, Nate kissed him.

"See," Ricky told Georgie. "Dad and Nate love each other."

Brent and Nate turned when they heard him say that.

"Did you say Dad?" Brent asked.

"Yes," Ricky said ducking his head and looking shy.

"Was it a mistake?" Brent asked.

"No." Ricky still looked shy, but then he raised his eyes and looked up at Brent. Brent was smiling at him with tears in his eyes.

"You're the best son in the whole world," Brent told him. He picked him up, hugged him, and kissed him about a million times.

Waiting until Brent was done showering him with kisses, Ricky asked, "When you and Nate get married, are things going to change, or are they going to be the same?"

"Both," Brent told him and set him back on the floor.

As Ricky stood there thinking over his answer, Nate leaned down and kissed him on the forehead and smiled. He decided to give his own answer.

"From now on, we are going to write our own future, our own story," Nate told him, hoping that would make more sense.

"Happily ever after?" Ricky asked, his eyes brightening.

"Happily ever after, "Nate told him.

"We'll be as happy as clams," Brent confirmed.

"We'll be happy clams," Georgie said.

"See, she gets it," Brent said.

"Georgie, what are clams?" Nate asked just out of curiosity.

"Clams are fishies. Clams are happy fishies," she said.

"Not exactly," Nate told her.

"Yes," she disagreed. "Ricky said so. Clams live in the sea. They are fishies."

"No. I told you they're like fish that live in little seashell houses," Ricky corrected her. He made clamshells out of his hands then opened and closed them. Georgie did the same.

"Fishies," she insisted.

"Come on. I'll show you," Ricky said and led her to the library.

Brent and Nate watched them walk off, arguing.

"So this is our family," Nate said.

Brent only smiled as he gazed at him. Nate leaned in for a kiss just as Quin and John came down the stairs.

"Look at how smug he is!" John said, looking at Brent.

John's hair was sticking up, and Quin was rubbing his eyes. It was clear that they had both just jumped out of bed.

"Don't be jealous," Brent told him.

John rushed at Brent and Nate and wrapped them both in a hug and kissed them on the cheek several times.

"Oh, be a little jealous," Brent told him, but John just kept hugging them. "I don't care. I got mine."

They got the same big hug from Quin plus he pulled Nate into a headlock and rubbed his head. When he let him up, he told him, "You did good. You'll have him flying right in no time."

"Hey!" Brent objected, but that only got him the same treatment. With his hair all messed up, Brent smiled at Quin and said, "I did good."

What Quin did reminded Brent of what his mother used to do, kind of. He could see both her and his dad smiling at him. Tears came to his eyes, and he hugged Nate. Sharing his mood, Nate held him tight as Quin made fun of them and John scolded them. Brent never wanted to let go of Nate, and he wanted to marry him so much. Everyone he loved wouldn't be there, but his dream was going to come true. His parents weren't going to see him get married to the man he loved, but his kids would and Quin and John. He was going to be Nate's husband, and he couldn't wait for that day to come. Brent felt so alive as Nate kissed him, and love and happiness finally came together in his heart.

The End

Also by Trina Solet:

~And Manny Makes Three - Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

~Unexpected Dad - Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

~Make It Better - A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?